

THE ORIGINS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

By the end of this chapter you will:

- appreciate why there are problems with defining PR
- have a clearer understanding of why the history and theory of PR matter
- understand the current dominant theory and the main theoretical origins of PR, as well as see how and why PR theory relates to PR practice

INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at the relationship between the history and theory of PR and the way that PR history has influenced the development of PR theory. It is important for PR practitioners to have an understanding of theory because it can, among other things, help them to understand why some campaigns succeed and others do not.

PR theory is drawn from different but related strands of thought – firstly communication theory, and secondly the analysis of how PR has been practised in the past – and together they have produced a distinctive PR theory. Communication theory is the study of the transmission of information and the methods by which information is delivered: it is a huge subject in its own right, encompassing many different schools of thought. For the purposes of this book, we will look at those areas of communication theory that are most relevant to PR, for example, the study of the processes of communication from sender to receiver. From PR theory, we will go on to examine in detail the excellence theory, developed by American academic James Grunig. This theory is currently the most influential and although it has many critics it is still worthwhile to look at it and understand how it emerged, why it is significant, and why it is criticised.

PR: ONE OR MANY DEFINITIONS?

There are some books, mostly hostile to PR (and also the occasional first student essay on PR), that will start with almost gleeful opening lines: 'It's very difficult to define public relations' or 'There are many definitions of public relations and each one is as relevant as the other'. Critics of PR will then seize on this apparent lack of agreement about a definition as proof that PR is fundamentally flawed. They will argue that a definition cannot be provided because there is nothing of substance to PR: it is an illusion, all spin and floss. On the other hand, how can there be any confusion about what it stands for when we all know what PR is – namely getting publicity for your client or company in the media? One of the aims of this book is to demonstrate that PR has a lot more to it than this and that it now stands at the very centre of modern day communications.

The American academic Rex Harlow produced what he claimed to be the first all-inclusive definition of PR. His research identified 472 definitions that had been produced, from the early 1900s when modern PR emerged, to 1976 when he was working. He put together their common elements to produce the first global definition:

Public Relations is the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems and issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools. (Harlow, 1976: 36)

Critics of Harlow have said that precisely because this definition tries to cover everything, it becomes too detailed and is therefore useless. There are also many who would argue that it is not possible to provide a definition for a profession that covers such diverse practices, ranging from the campaigning activities of Greenpeace to getting coverage for an out-of-favour actor in the tabloids.

In 1978, at its first meeting in Mexico, the World Assembly of Public Relations agreed upon a definition that became known as 'The Mexico Definition'. This was significant because it was the first time that various national organisations had agreed on one that they could all accept:

Public Relations is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation's and the public interest. (Warnaby & Moss, 2002: 7)

The key element in this was the attempt to enhance PR's credibility by linking it with social science and suggesting that there was a scientific, objective, and therefore factual basis for it. In contrast to these somewhat lengthy definitions theorists have also made their contributions to the definition game. James Grunig and Todd Hunt produced this more focused definition: PR is *'The management of communications between an organization and its publics* (Grunig and Hunt, 1984: 8).

Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000: 6), who produced one of the first books summarising PR theory and practice, defined PR as follows: *'Public Relations is the management function that identifies, establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and various publics on whom its success or failure depends'*. The key link between these two definitions is that it embeds PR as part of an organisation's management, which gives it clout and credibility and lifts it away from the mechanical process of merely supporting a company's sales (see below).

In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) offers a definition that introduces another new dimension:

Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations practice is the discipline, which looks after reputation – with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. (www.cipr.co.uk)

This new element equates PR with reputation management. While this might seem reasonable, as we shall see below, there are many who would criticise the idea that PR is 'about' reputation management (for a detailed exploration of this argument, see Chapter 4). Interestingly, the above CIPR definition evolved from an earlier one. These evolving definitions illustrate the dynamism of PR and show how the industry has had to adapt to changing circumstances.

Another definition with a different emphasis is offered by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA):

Public Relations helps an organisation and its publics to adapt mutually to each other. Public Relations is an organisation's efforts to win the co-operation of groups of people. Public Relations helps organisations effectively interact and communicate with their key publics. (www.prsa.org)

Where PR comes from and why history matters

When did PR start? Who was the first PR person? Does it matter if you don't know where PR came from? Will knowing its history make you better at your job or enhance your effectiveness as a PR practitioner? The history of PR matters

because it has been used by theorists to explain how PR is practised and to produce theories. Practice develops theory and theory helps develop practice, so theory and practice are however linked thereby.

There are those together who want to give PR a very long history because in so doing they believe it enhances its credibility. For example, according to Cutlip et al. (2000: 102):

The communication of information to influence viewpoints or actions can be traced from the earliest civilisations. Archaeologists found a farm bulletin in Iraq that told the farmers of 1800 BC how to sow their crops, how to irrigate. Public relations was used many centuries ago in England, where King's maintained Lord Chancellors as 'Keepers of the King's Conscience.'

The Boston Tea Party, which helped start the American War of Independence, is another example of a PR event that any modern PR company would be proud of because of the publicity it generated. We must remember that these 'PR-like' events (Grunig and Hunt, 1984) were not carried out with the intention of producing publicity. The motives of those who carried out these actions were totally different to those of a 21st century PR planner, and while it might appear to be a bit of harmless fun to describe the Boston Tea Party as a 'PR event' there is a serious element to such interpretations. *In viewing these events as early PR events* we are placing our values and viewpoints on the past when in fact they might have had a completely different meaning in that time and place. The past can only be understood by understanding historical events in their specific cultural context.

One of the problems with the study of PR history is that there is no single history of its development worldwide, instead there are a number of different and unrelated public relations histories (Pearson, 1992). The majority of the research about the history and development of PR has been conducted in the USA and this has been for a number of reasons. Firstly, the USA has the largest PR industry in the world and many of its consultancies have played a role in developing PR practice and 'exporting' it abroad. Secondly, the USA has a long established community of PR academics who have been able to carry out more research. However, there is a problem in simply relying on a history that is so focused on one country. This could lead to the belief that PR can only be practised in one way and with one set of values and ignore the contribution made to PR practice by other countries, cultures and traditions.

Academics are now beginning to look at the history of PR practice elsewhere. L'Etang and Pieczka (2006) include chapters on German and Swedish PR and L'Etang (2004) has also written a valuable history of PR in the UK, which highlights the different origins for PR there from those of the USA. Zerfass, van Ruler and Siramesh (2008) have produced an important book on European PR history and theory. Having said that we do need to know about how PR developed in the USA because the key PR academics James Grunig and Todd Hunt drew on that

history in order to develop their influential four models of PR and also what has become known as the excellence theory.

The early years: Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays

PR, as we understand it today, began in the last years of the 19th and in the early years of the 20th century. Early practitioners were known as publicists. The most well-known of these was the circus owner Phineas T. Barnum (1810–1891) who became infamous in the 19th century for the often cynical way he promoted his shows. Barnum coined the phrase ‘There’s no such thing as bad publicity’ and used a variety of dubious publicity stunts to attract crowds to his shows. In one example, Barnum toured with a blind and paralysed African-American slave called Joice Heth, claiming she was the former nurse of George Washington and was 160 years old. In fact when Heth died in 1836 she was no more than 80 years old. Barnum didn’t mind if he was attacked in the press – it all added to the publicity for his shows (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

As we shall see later on in the book publicists are still at work and some of them are using those selfsame and dubious publicity stunts to attract attention to their clients.

This link between theory and practice is nowhere better illustrated than in the career and work of two of PR’s most influential figures – Ivy Ledbetter Lee (1877–1934) and Edward Bernays (1891–1955) – who made contributions to both the practice and theory of PR. Interestingly they also represent two different and opposite ways of practising PR: to Lee it was an ‘art’ in which creativity and innovation should be critical, while Edward Bernays, influenced by the psychological theories of his uncle, Sigmund Freud, thought PR could be a ‘scientific’ practice. Lee and Bernays were contemporaries who were practising PR in New York at the same time. Lee was in many ways the ultimate PR practitioner and unlike Bernays was not interested in developing a theoretical basis for PR or even in attempting to understand how it operated. He is supposed to have told Bernays that when they died PR as a profession would die with them. While that story may or may not be true, it usefully illustrates the difference between the two. For Lee, PR activities were no more than a series of short-term events to attract publicity and fulfil a specific purpose. Bernays, however was always looking for deeper theories and understanding about how to control and influence audiences.

Ivy Lee

In the USA in the early 20th century big industries – such as coal, iron and steel production, railways and banking – were run by companies that were owned by several powerful families. The Rockefellers, the Vanderbilts, the Astors and the Carnegies were among the richest and most powerful businessmen in the world and their names have become synonymous with wealth and power. Collectively

they were known as the ‘robber barons’, because the dominance of their respective industries was often based on anti-competitive and unfair business practices. Big business also virtually controlled federal and local government.

The communication practice they and their companies carried out is sometimes called ‘the public be damned’ phase of PR, as it summarises their lack of concern and interest in communicating with the general populace. The actual phrase was uttered by William Vanderbilt, and although it is often used to characterise the contempt that the robber barons had for ordinary people history might have been a little unfair to Vanderbilt in this instance. He was replying to a reporter who had asked him why he ran one of his railways at a loss and had then suggested he was doing so for public benefit (Toth and Heath, 1992: 121). Vanderbilt’s reply was: ‘The public be damned. What does the public care about the railroads except to get as much out of them for as small consideration as possible. Of course we like to do everything possible for the benefit of humanity in general, but when we do we first see that we are benefiting ourselves’. According to Tedlow (quoted in Pearson, 1992), Vanderbilt’s sentiments then were similar to those of any modern day chief executive of a modern public company – that the interests of the company’s shareholders are paramount and that companies are not run as ‘social enterprises’.

These companies used press agents or publicists to communicate for them and their role was to try to restrict and control the activities of the media. They banned the press from industrial activities because they believed that public disclosures about what they did would have been fatal to many operations. Press agents were often hired to serve as buffers between businesses and the public in order to prevent the truth from getting out (Hiebert, in Toth & Heath, 1992). As a consequence of businesses not communicating their side of the story, the media ran hostile stories which helped to create an anti-business climate. Anger at poor working conditions caused a series of major strikes, indeed some estimates suggest that half a million workers were either killed or injured during this period. There were a series of nationwide strikes such as in Pensacola, Florida and New York. Twelve people died when a strike in McKees Rock, Pennsylvania, erupted into a bloody battle between striking steel workers, private security agents, and the Pennsylvania State Police. And at least 50 people died in what became known as the first mine war, in West Virginia in 1912–13. Incidents of this nature seriously damaged the reputation of business, which was made worse by a communications policy that not only refused to speak to the outside world but that also treated journalists as the enemy.

In 1902 the pressure on business increased after *McClure’s Magazine* published a series of articles by Lincoln Steffers on corruption in municipal and city government, accusing big business of buying politicians and controlling the government. The Commissioner of the New York Police at the time, Theodore Roosevelt, described this type of ground-breaking journalism as ‘muckraking’. This marked the lowest point in the relationship between business and the media and led to the emergence of a new mode of business communication. Ivy Lee (Pearson, 1992) was a journalist working in New York at the same time as the ‘muckrakers’, but unlike many of his

fellow journalists, he sympathised and identified with the powerful businessmen he wrote about and thought they were good people, although misunderstood.

Lee spotted a business opportunity in representing the interests of big business and in 1904 he opened his own PR consultancy, Parker & Lee, with George Parker, another ex-journalist. He became an adviser to big business corporations who were under attack on a variety of fronts. He took a totally different approach from that of the press agents and publicists. He believed that rather than keep quiet and say nothing, the best policy was to be as open as possible and to communicate with the outside world.

Lee's first PR job for an industrial client was in 1906 when the 29 year old was retained by the Pennsylvania Railroad Company (Harrison and Moloney, 2004). It was a company that was typical of many at that time, refusing to communicate with journalists or to give any information about accidents in which it was involved, and believing that by doing so they would be admitting to weakness. Lee changed such practices by granting access to journalists and speaking to them. In October 1906, after a train crash that killed 50 people, Lee produced what historians of PR believe was the first clearly designated 'Press Release'. 'Statement from the Road', the public statement from the Pennsylvania Railroad, was printed verbatim by the *New York Times* and won the company praise for its openness and honesty. By systemising communications and encouraging companies to be more open Lee demonstrated the benefits that good communication could bring.

To make clear that his approach was a totally different way of communicating, he sent newspaper editors his famous 'Declaration of Principles' in which he made clear how he intended to work. The principles were to set new standards in relations between PR practitioners and the media (see Box 2.1).

Box 2.1 Extracts from Ivy Lee's 'Declaration of Principles'

'This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news.

'This is not an advertising agency. If you think any of our matter ought properly to go to your business office, do not use it.

'Our matter is accurate. Further details on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any editor will be assisted most carefully in verifying directly any statement of fact. ...

'In brief, our plan is frankly, and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about.'

The important point about this Declaration of Principles is that it says that PR will be different and this marked a revolution in relations between business, the press, and the public. This was no longer the 'public be dammed' phase but now 'the public be informed' phase (Hiebert, 1966).

Edward Bernays

For all Lee's impact and influence on developing a new way to practise PR, it is Edward Bernays who is known as the 'father of public relations' for his attempts to introduce systems and science into PR. As the nephew of the psychologist Sigmund Freud he tried to use his uncle's insights to manipulate public opinion. In some ways Bernays illustrates the darker side of communication practice; he was an elitist and believed the manipulation of public opinion was necessary as society's tendency to follow the 'herd instinct' was irrational and dangerous. While his motives might have been well-meaning, history was to demonstrate what could happen when such theories were used for evil purposes.

Bernays was born in Vienna in 1891 and his family moved to the USA a year later. In 1913 he started his PR career by working as a press agent for a number of theatres, concerts and ballets. When America entered the First World War in 1917 Bernays began working for the Committee of Public Information. This committee was an American propaganda machine set up to package, advertise and sell the war as one that would 'make the world safe for democracy'. Its aim was to get the American people to support the war. Here, Bernays had an opportunity to put his interests in psychology, as applied to human behaviour, into operation.

In 1919 when the war ended he opened his own practice in New York, describing himself not as a PR practitioner but famously as PR counselor. In 1923 he wrote the first PR textbook, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, and in the same year set up the first PR course at New York University. Bernays was a pioneer of modern propaganda techniques and applied theories of mass psychology and persuasion to the needs of corporate and political organisations. He believed these techniques could sell anything, from bacon to cigarettes to soap. In the 1920s, whilst working for the American Tobacco Company, Bernays pioneered the practice of linking corporate sales campaigns with popular social causes when he persuaded women's rights marchers in New York City to hold up Lucky Strike cigarettes as symbolic 'Torches of Freedom'. Women at the time did not smoke cigarettes in public, but by linking smoking to the freedom to vote – a right that women had just won – it made smoking look like the activity of the modern, emancipated woman and was a gesture demonstrating their equality with men. It was one of Bernays biggest publicity successes.

In 1929 he organised the first global media event when he dreamed up 'Light's Golden Jubilee' for General Electric, a world-wide celebration commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the electric light bulb. This, Bernays said, was an example of what he called 'overt acts' (modern media events) that could awaken apparently subconscious feelings. Bernays openly described what he did as propaganda but was forced to apologise for using the term after Joseph Goebbels, the Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in Nazi Germany, adopted the term in 1933.

The different ways that Barnum, Lee and Bernays practised PR were used by the theorists Grunig and Hunt as the basis for three of their four models of PR practice. These are discussed later in this chapter in the section on PR theory.

International growth

The international growth of PR practice began with countries with strong links to the USA and US companies. In Brazil, for example, PR can trace its origins back to 1910, about the same time that PR began in the USA. In the UK, American PR companies began opening offices in London after the Second World War. In Japan the first PR society was founded in 1964. As political regimes changed even countries previously hostile to the USA began to embrace PR. In Russia, one of the most recent PR markets, the emergence of PR can be directly linked to a campaign for the opening of the first McDonald's restaurant in Moscow in 1990.

Significantly, the least developed PR markets are those which have had least exposure to US influence. China is the most recent PR market where the 2008 Olympic Games played an important role in helping the industry to develop. The development of Chinese businesses globally, and the inward movement of multinational companies to China, have also been important factors in the growth of the industry. In 2006 it was estimated that turnover for the PR industry in China was US\$1.1 billion: from 2006 to 2007 the annual growth rate was 33% (Zhao, 2008).

There is increasing interest in whether specific economic and social circumstances will produce a particular type of PR practice. For the US/UK model of PR to thrive it has to have two essential requirements – a market economy to allow for the uncontrolled buying and selling of goods and a free press that will allow communication that is free of censorship of news. In China and Russia these conditions have been relatively recent – Russia has only enjoyed a free media since the mid-1980s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union – and as a result the PR industries in both countries are not robust but are nevertheless growing very quickly.

As the number of studies into how communication is practised in other non-English speaking culture increases a different picture might emerge of the US/UK type practice. Zerfass et al. (2008), for example, bring together contributions from a number of largely German-speaking theorists and argue that PR has a longer history there than in the USA. Van Ruler and Vercic argue that PR in continental Europe is increasingly becoming known as Communication Management and encompassing a wider range of disciplines. It might be from this point that we shall see alternative forms of practice emerge.

The history of PR in the UK

The only complete history of PR in the UK was written in 2004 by Jacquie L'Etang. According to her research, the main driver of PR activity before the Second World War was central and local government: 'There was relatively little public relations in the private sector prior to the Second World War. Activities in the private sector were generally confined to advertising, but are nevertheless significant in the story of public relations in terms of their relationship with propaganda,

the self-image of practitioners, and the structures and terminology adopted in consultancies. Public relations was limited to a handful of press agencies, international companies, and national organisations' (L'Etang, 2004: 58).

During the Second World War the British government was engaged in communications activity across a wide range of fronts. On the Home Front it helped keep up morale during the war. In key neutral countries, such as the USA, it was used to counter German propaganda and build support for the Allied cause. Propaganda was also aimed at occupied countries and Germany itself. L'Etang argues that the wartime experience had an impact on how the UK population reacted to news, 'sensitising civilian and military populations to issues of propaganda, information and intelligence. Although Britain cultivated notions of media independence and truthful information, there was an extensive internal and external propaganda effort' (2004: 65).

According to L'Etang, those who practised propaganda during the Second World War took that experience into private practice when the war ended. She highlights the case of Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, who was head of the Special Operation Executive's 'F' section during the war. Before that he had worked for the Ford Motor Company and returned to it at the war's end as Director of Public Relations.

THEORY: WHY SOME CAMPAIGNS WORK AND SOME DON'T

The reaction of many people outside PR when confronted by the phrase 'public relations theory' might well be the type of baffled bemusement similar to that experienced by the comedian Peter Kay's father when first confronted with the delights of garlic bread: 'Garlic? Bread? Garlic and bread?' Public relations? Theory? How can PR have any theory? What theory do you need to construct a press release to publicise your company's product, service or charity? What is the theoretical basis for gaining publicity for your celebrity client by getting a story in the *News of the World*? Because at the end of the day, that is what PR is all about – generating as much coverage in as many newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations as possible for your clients. Well, that might be the 'popular' image, but as we will continually demonstrate throughout this book, there is a lot more to PR than that.

Austin and Pinkleton (2006: 271) highlight the importance of theory to PR practice: 'Theories – essentially generalizations about how people think and behave – help determine appropriate goals and objectives for a communications programme. Scientifically tested theories also help communication programmes develop effective strategies to achieve those goals and objectives'. And according to Windahl, Signitzer and Olson (1992: 1): 'All communication planners use theories to guide their work. Often these are their own theories based on

their own experiences and on common practice. Many are unaware that formal research, both academic and non-academic has generated a continuously growing body of theories applicable to planned communication’.

We shall see later how PR occupies a powerful and influential position between those who send out messages and those who receive them. As PR practitioners we are working with the way humans absorb messages and information. Some campaigns work, some do not; some messages will have a resonance and impact, and others will not. As a PR practitioner it is necessary to understand why one campaign has worked but others have not, to explore the language that we use and how and why it is important. This is where theory can help. To understand this and a great deal more – such as, for example, the role that culture plays in shaping the way we perceive and understand facts and information – we require a theoretical basis.

PR research emerged as a distinct activity in the 1950s and 1960s as an offshoot of mass communication research (Botan and Hazleton, 2006). The research focus was on producing results that would help the daily work of PR practitioners, that is, it looked at how to make what they did in their practice more effective. Theories that have such a practical focus are known as ‘normative’ theories: ‘Most public relations practitioners in the 1950s and 1960s saw public relations primarily as an activity to influence the all-powerful media – through day-to-day media relations and activities and planned public information campaigns. Public relations researchers, therefore, joined with mass communications scholars to document the effectiveness of public relations’ (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, in Botan and Hazleton, 2006: 22). Research started in the USA because of the size of the PR and advertising industries there and their relationship with the media.

COMMUNICATION THEORY

Communication theory is the study of the way that humans communicate with each other. It includes the analysis of interpersonal communication and also theories about how the brain functions. It encompasses both written and spoken language. The term *communication theory* can refer to one single theory, or it can be used as the summary, the ‘collective wisdom’ of all those single theories (Littlejohn, 2002). There is no one theory which we can say provides the fundamental explanation of communication. Instead, there are many different communication theories and each has a validity because they can help us to understand different aspects of reality or why some actions work and others do not. From among the many communication theories, we shall only look here at those that can help to explain how the process of communication works. These are the most relevant to PR as they can assist us in understanding why the transmission of information through certain channels of communication does or does not work.

The act of communication is arguably one of the most important activities, if not the most important, we undertake and it is central not only to our role in

the world but also to our ability to make sense of the way we live and relate to others. Think of how much we communicate not only verbally but also non-verbally through our body language, which is said to betray our real emotions and feelings. Through body language we are communicating even when we believe we are not. As body language experts tell us when analysing the body language of politicians, we may say one thing but our body language may tell a different story (Littlejohn, 2002).

The study of communication has had a long history that goes back to Ancient Greece and Aristotle, but its academic study really only started in earnest after the First World War. This was stimulated by a number of factors, with possibly the most important being the rise and growth of the mass media and advances in communication technology. This growth of the mass media was accompanied by a rise in advertising. With the emergence of potentially new and influential media such as television and radio, advertisers wanted to know whether the adverts they were placing there were having an impact and the ways they could make them more effective (Littlejohn, 2002). After the Second World War sociology and social psychology also emerged as legitimate academic disciplines and began to contribute to communications theory from their perspectives.

At the end of the Second World War a difference developed in the way that researchers in the USA and Europe approached communication theory. Broadly speaking, US researchers followed research methods that were used in the physical sciences. In an attempt to try and find a fundamental explanation of communication they based their methods on objective and quantitative research and statistics. In Europe, however, research focussed on the analysis of cultural and historical factors and was broadly influenced by the Marxist philosophical tradition which argued that an individual cannot be separated from their economic and social context. Communication must therefore be understood within this setting.

McQuail and Windahl (1993: 6) offer the following explanation for the motivation of communication research, illustrating how it drew on a wide range of sources: 'Research into communication in general had its origins in the wish to test and increase the efficiency and effectiveness in the spheres of education, propaganda, telecommunications, advertising and public and human relations. Research activity began with practical concerns and was fed by developments in psychology and sociology and by general advances in methodology, especially the use of experiments, social surveys and statistics'.

Laswell's communication model

Two early, influential, and similar theories that emerged from the US scientific research tradition were Laswell's Model of Communication and the Linear Model developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver.

Harold Laswell (1902–1978) was an American political scientist whose thinking was influenced by behavioural psychological theory. During the Second

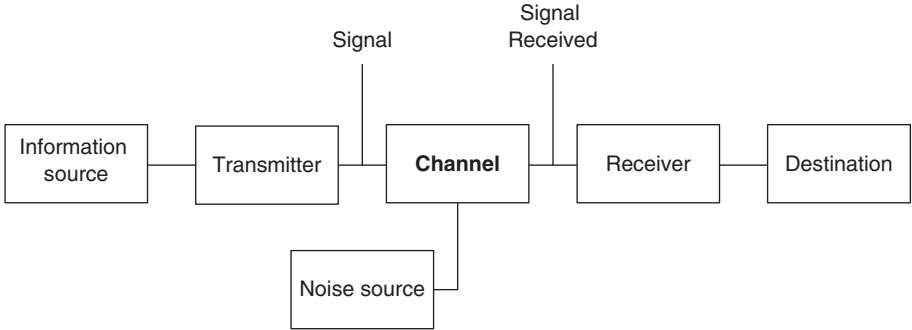


Figure 2.1 Linear Model of Communication – Shannon and Weaver, 1949

World War he was Chief of the Experimental Division for the Study of War Time Communications at the Library of Congress in Washington. One of his jobs was analysing Nazi propaganda and identifying how it was used to secure the acquiescence and support of the German population for Hitler and his regime’s atrocities.

Laswell’s 1948 model is based on a series of questions: Who? Says what? In which channel? To whom? With what effect?

Table 2.1 Laswell’s Communication Model

Who?	Says what?	In what channel?	To whom?	With what effect?
Communicator	Message	Channel	Receiver	Effect

His answers offer an explanation as to how the mass media impacts upon an audience and explore the emerging ‘mass media’ – newspapers, radio, films and TV. Laswell’s theory assumes, firstly, that the communicator intends to influence the receiver, and secondly, that the receiver is not only a passive receptor of what is sent from the source and that we all respond in exactly the same way. The theory does not allow for any feedback, interruption, or interference with the message.

Linear model

In 1949 telecommunication engineers Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver were working for Bell Telephone Laboratories and together they developed a similar model to Laswell’s. This became one of the most influential of the earliest communications models. Shannon and Weaver’s Linear Model is based on Information Theory which grew out of the boom in the telecommunications industry after the Second World War and involved the quantitative study of signals. In *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949) they outlined their Linear Model of Communications. This prompted social scientists to look at communication

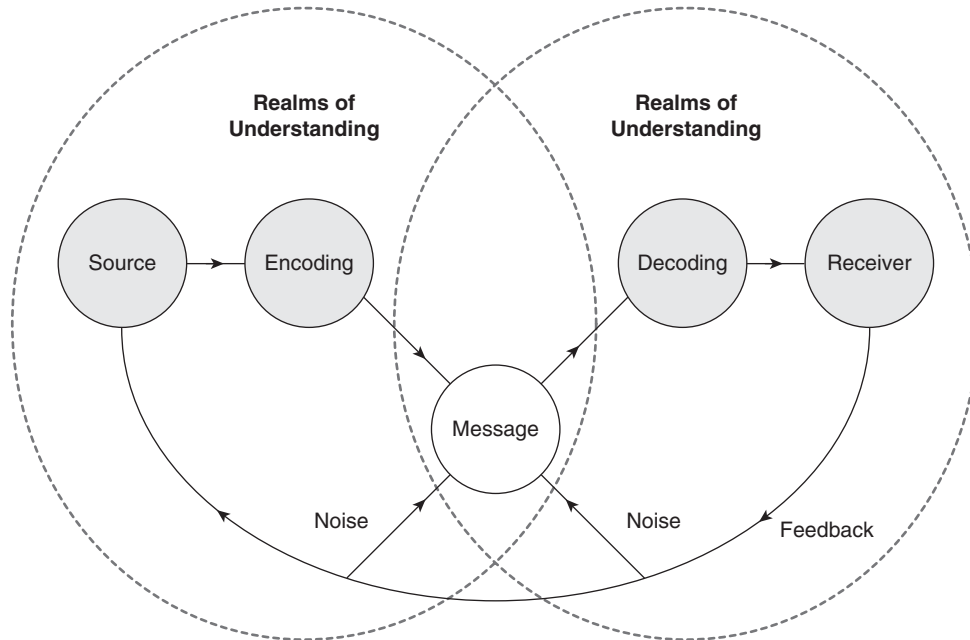


Figure 2.2 Linear Model of Communication – based on Schramm (1955) and Shannon and Weaver (1962)

within the framework of a model. According to McQuail and Windahl (1993) this use of models was initially appealing to communication scholars of the time primarily because they were developing a particular interest in effects and effectiveness. It was also consistent with the stimulus-response model of behaviour control, which was then becoming popular in psychology research. Mass communication scholars were also increasingly interested in ordering and codifying existing knowledge and enquiry in their research.

Laswell’s and Shannon and Weaver’s models are known as transmission models – where communication is reduced to transmitting information. However, the aim of PR is not just to transmit information in a passive way, but also to influence or persuade the receptor to a course of action. As with other transmission models, Shannon and Weaver were interested in looking at the channels of communication; theirs is a linear, one-way process from sender to receiver who apparently communicate in isolation with no social context.

According to Shannon and Weaver – *a source* selects and then transmits a *message* (consisting of the signs to be transmitted). The *transmitter* then translates the signs into signals that are sent over a *channel* to a *receiver*. The final element in the model is *noise*. Noise can be any outside distortion or distraction from outside that interferes with the transmission and receipt of the signal. For

students in a lecture theatre, for example, noise can be anything outside that disturbs or interferes with what's being heard – a car or conversation coming from other students, or someone moving their chair in the room, anything which disturbs how the lecture is received. Thoughts that are more interesting than the lecturer's words are also part of this noise (Fiske, 2002).

Noise is any outside interference that is not intended by the receiver (Fiske, 2002), for example the crackling of a telephone line, or 'snow' on television screens. 'Noise, whether it originates in the channel, the audience, the sender, or the message itself, always confuses the intention of the sender and thus limits the amount of desired information that can be sent in a given time' (Fiske, 2002: 8). 'The inability on the part of the communicators to realise that a sent and a received message are not always identical, is a common reason why communication fails' (McQuail & Windahl, 1993: 17).

The Linear Model has been heavily criticised for being too linear, i.e. one-way and mechanistic without offering a sufficient explanation of reality. This Model does seek to understand how communication takes place, but only for a limited range of situations, and it is certainly not a universal explanation for all forms of communication. It is helpful in explaining what happens in interpersonal communication – the speaker's brain is the source, the voice is the transmitter, and the air through which the voice travels is the channel. The listener's ear is the receiver while the listener's brain is the destination (Littlejohn, 2002).

The linear model, or bullet theory as it is sometimes called, was one of the most popular among PR practitioners. For many, it reflects actual PR activity such as the production of a press release and its distribution through the mass media. Austin and Pinkleton (2006) however point out its limitations – it might produce plenty of coverage and press cuttings but it does not show the quality of the coverage, that is, whether anyone took any notice of what they read or whether the right aspects of the campaign were covered in the newspaper articles.

Shannon and Weaver's model stimulated further research and this in turn produced other models which refined the basic theory, thereby producing a closer approximation to reality. This process of taking a theory and refining and adding to it is how scientific knowledge advances, through a public examination of theories, criticism refinement, and further development. Later theories also criticised process models. Wilbur Schramm, explaining the difference between the linear model and the one he developed with C.E. Osgood, said: 'It is misleading to think of the communication process as starting somewhere and ending somewhere. It really is endless' (McQuail & Windahl, 1993: 20). Osgood and Schram's circular model is the complete opposite of Shannon and Weaver's: it is not concerned with the communication channels but with the participants in the process.

What their model demonstrates is the way in which people will believe that news and information is disseminated through the mass media, undiluted and unadulterated by any other influences. Another criticism of the Linear Model is

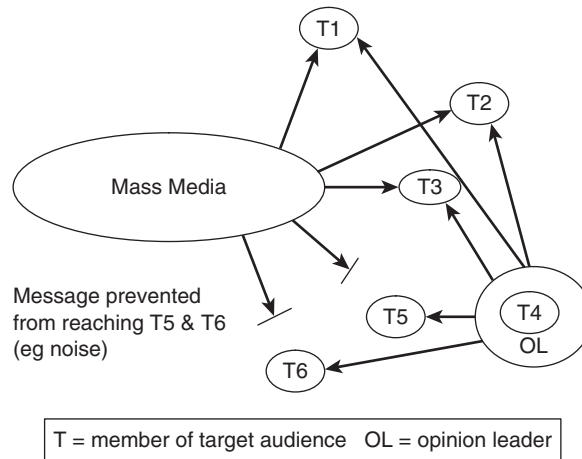


Figure 2.3 Two-step Model of Communication
 Links to the importance of opinion leaders (Midgley & Dowling, 1993)

that it implies equality between the sender and receiver, which in practice is not the case as clearly the sender has more power than the receiver.

Two-step communication model

PR theorists are interested in theories that look at how information is transmitted and received. One of the most interesting communication models, from a PR perspective, was developed by Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues. Lazarsfeld analysed voting patterns in New York in 1940, and found that voters seemed more influenced by their friends during an election campaign than by the media – opinions were therefore created in many cases not directly but indirect (Littlejohn, 2002).

Messages distributed through the media are influenced not directly but by interpersonal communication (Littlejohn, 2002) and from this, Lazarsfeld developed his Two-step Communication Model which has had a significant influence on our understanding of the role of the mass media. According to this model, information flows from the mass media to opinion leaders/formers in the community and from them to people they know who are in effect receiving their information second and third hand. Many people’s views of the world are, therefore, influenced by outsiders.

In their 1955 book, *Personal Influence*, Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz developed the two-step flow theory by identifying the role played in the dissemination of information by those individuals they had identified as opinion leaders who exist in all social and occupational groups. They receive their information from the media and then pass it to the rest of their peer group. (Littlejohn, 2002).

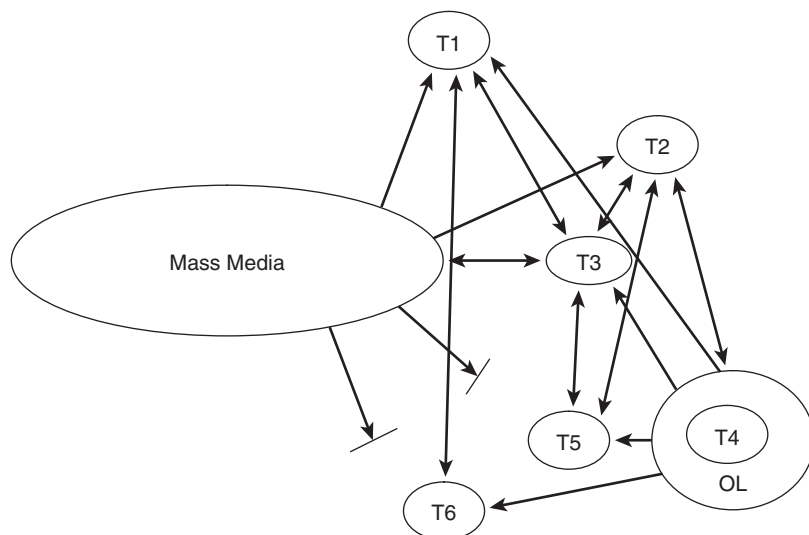


Figure 2.4 Multi-step Model of Communication

In practice we have all experienced how the Two-Step Model of Communication works when someone asks: 'Did you see that programme on TV last night?' If you didn't, they will proceed to tell you what happened. Your opinion and perception about the content and even the quality of the programme will be shaped by their opinion and what they have chosen to tell you. The internet has given inter-personal communication a new dimension, with users having access to a whole range of different sources of information through chat-rooms, message boards, Myspace, Youtube and blogs, and this growth leads to diversity and richness of opinion.

These are useful models to PR and illustrate how theory can help practical campaigns – simply using 'the mass media' in order to get a message across is no longer possible or appropriate. A sophisticated campaign will need to be targeted and based on a proper understanding of where key audiences receive their information from, and that may not be via any of the traditional outlets at all.

PR THEORY

Communication research and the PR theory that grew out of it look at the relationship between the senders of information and the receivers of it and in many ways this defines that most basic of PR activities – how to communicate effectively with a group. But how do we characterise the group to whom we are communicating?

Readers? Viewers? Listeners? While all of these are appropriate it is more common to use the term found in communication theory – the ‘audience’ or ‘mass audience’. An analysis of this leads to one of PR’s most basic theories – ‘publics’.

In PR theory ‘publics’ has a precise and clear definition and whilst well established in academic literature it is not as widely used by PR practitioners who will often use similar terms as used in marketing and advertising. This can sometimes cause confusion. ‘Publics’ describes the recipients in the process of communication between the sender and receiver and according to the theory there are different categories of publics. The confusion occurs because other terms can also be used to describe these recipients, such as ‘target audience’ and ‘stakeholders’.

Mass audience

In the 1950s and 1960s when most of the first ‘mass communication’ models emerged the process communication theories made it all seem relatively simple. A mass (large) audience was reached directly through a limited range of media – radio, television, newspapers and films. Newspapers still had large readerships: daily national newspapers were read by millions, so it was possible to speak of a ‘mass media’ that communicated with a ‘mass audience’, and the emerging public relations research was largely based around how to make PR messages work more effectively through mass media channels reaching mass audiences.

The term ‘mass audience’, however, suggests an audience that is largely passive and simply and uncritically consumes whatever they are watching, listening to, or reading, with little or no critical feedback from them reaching the media. There is also the implication that such audiences might be easily manipulated by media owners. However, even if that was the situation in the 1950s today this most certainly isn’t the case. Modern audiences are far more aware of what it is adverts are attempting to do. They are more active and discriminating in their media consumption. Meanwhile the speed of technological change appears to be increasing and consumers have to work hard to keep up with the latest developments in mobile phones, TVs and satellite receivers, and internet and PC-based communications.

We live in a fragmented world where there is greater access to new ideas, trends and developments from across the globe and the technology has swung the balance of power away from the media owner towards the audience and the consumer. The new channels of communication, such as the internet and digital television, mean the audience is no longer in the hands of the TV programme makers. Audiences can now choose when to listen to the radio or watch TV programmes, and in effect create their own TV schedules, cutting across the traditional idea of a single channel.

Social network sites, blogs and an ability to download TV programmes onto computers all increase consumer power. In the face of such a fragmented market, it might appear impossible for advertisers or anyone wanting to communicate

with an audience to decide where and how to deliver their message. In fact, the reverse is true as it provides them with more opportunities. It is now possible to identify channels of communication that will appeal to niche audiences who have consciously chosen a specific medium rather than simply watching something because it is on. It is also now possible to identify much more easily than before those key niche markets, or more appropriately, to target audiences, and this can command a higher advertising premium than one based simply on volume.

Target audience

In this fragmented, rapidly changing landscape what advertisers need are communication channels that will deliver targeted groups with precise socio-economic information about their make-up. They can answer such questions as who do we want to communicate with and why? And knowing who it is you are going to communicate with is an absolute prerequisite for any successful PR, marketing, or advertising campaign. Before the launch of any campaign, intensive research should be carried out into the nature of the target audience. For example, what is the social composition? The target age group? What newspapers do they read? What TV programmes do they watch? What radio stations do they listen to? Where do they shop? What are their spending patterns? What are their typical likes and dislikes? Only when there is a clear idea of all this can a proper campaign be planned. This campaign can then utilise a whole range of different communication channels, such as TV, radio, print, and now social networks in order to reach their target audience.

Publics

'Mass audience' and 'target audience' are terms used in advertising, marketing, and PR and mean roughly the same in each discipline. PR also uses 'publics' which whilst initially appearing to mean something similar to audiences in fact does not. 'Audiences' is used to describe a group of people who are to be communicated to, while 'publics' when used in PR describes people who are affected by an issue.

In a democracy, people have the freedom to choose a course of action, while those who are concerned about how an issue might impact on their lives have the freedom to join together to try and do something about it. The theory of publics helps PR practitioners understand why it is and under what circumstances people will come together to take action.

American philosopher John Dewey (1927) first introduced the concept of publics and using it to describe a group of people who will consciously choose to act and work together to confront a similar issue or problem. They recognise that it exists and then organise to do something about it. Elements of the

definition were taken up by two American PR academics James Grunig and Todd Hunt (1984) and adapted for PR. They argued that there will be a range of responses from different people when confronted by a problem – some will ignore it and live with it, perhaps not even recognising it as a problem; or they will recognise it is a problem but choose not to do anything about it. Others will actively do what they can and campaign against it. What is interesting in this context is whether or not these different groups will always have similar socio-economic characteristics, or whether a problem will unite people from different backgrounds around the issue. As people take sides according to their interest in the issue, and join together with other like-minded individuals on the subject, they will collectively become a ‘public’ (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Individuals can be members of several different publics.

Grunig and Hunt defined four types of publics:

- *Non-public* – the organisation has no consequence on the group or the group has no consequence on the organisation.
- *Latent public* – a group faces a common threat from the organisation, but they do not detect a problem.
- *Aware public* – the group recognises a problem exists.
- *Active public* – having recognised that a problem exists, the group organises to do something about it and to establish what should be done to stop such problems emerging.

The role of PR practitioners working for the organisation is to identify which category their various publics fall into and then to organise their communication programme to deal with the most pressing problems. If, for example, the organisation has to deal with a non-public, then there is no PR problem and no need to do anything about it. However, Grunig and Hunt believe that a common mistake made by PR practitioners is to start organising a communication programme only when a public becomes active.

Active/activist publics can be difficult to communicate with because they have already made a decision and formed their views about both the issue and the company; they are not looking to be persuaded by the company’s point of view. They will only have negative opinions about the company and will not believe either the company or any independent third parties. In these situations there appears to be a fundamental breakdown in trust. Later in this book we will explore further the importance of trust and the consequences for an organisation when it breaks down. PR practitioners, both in-house and as consultants, often forget that publics will and do change, that they are not static. It is therefore necessary to be constantly reviewing what the company is doing and how it responds to its publics. Most importantly, companies should attempt to be proactive by identifying issues in advance to attempt to prevent issues becoming a problem. PR has an important role to play here – not only should it be responsible for sending

communication out, it should also listen to what is happening outside of the organisation. It can then feed what it learns back into the organisation and help to shape not just the presentation of information but also its actual content.

THE FOUR MODELS OF GRUNIG AND HUNT

Publics theory is an important tool for PR practitioners but Grunig and Hunt's most important theoretical contribution in 'Managing Public Relations' was to identify four types of practice based on the work of practitioners. Three of the four models were drawn from their analysis of PR history described above, and although based upon historical practice they nevertheless found it still described in the way many practitioners practise PR in the UK and USA.

The press agency/publicity model

The first model is based on the work of the press agents and publicists who were active from the middle of the 19th century to the early years of the 20th century. Their role was straightforward – to try to get as much publicity as possible for whomever they were working for. Grunig and Hunt (1984) argued that in many ways their PR practice was similar to propaganda because the information disseminated by the practitioner was probably incomplete, selective, distorted, or partially true. The flow of information was one-way and one-sided from the organisation to the intended recipients and no feedback was expected from them. The sole purpose of the publicity was to persuade people to pursue a specific course of action. Press agents and publicists used whatever tactics were necessary to achieve their aim – from the conventional press release to a range of publicity stunts and events – to maximise media coverage. Some of them, as we saw with the circus owner Phineas T. Barnum, were downright dubious and deceitful.

Box 2.2 Propaganda, Publicity and Public Relations

Grunig and Hunt, when considering the relationship between propaganda and press agency, linked some forms of PR activity to propaganda: 'Public Relations serves a propaganda function in the press agency/publicity model. Practitioners spread the faith of the organisation involved, often through incomplete, distorted or half-true information' (1984: 21).

(Continued)

(Continued)

What is propaganda? Is PR propaganda? What is the relationship between PR and propaganda? The modern PR industry is understandably nervous of accusations that any of its activities are in any way propaganda. This has acquired sinister overtones that imply deliberately lying in an attempt to manipulate the minds of others, usually by using concealed or underhand means. Propaganda developed negative associations during the Second World War, when the Nazi regime used sophisticated techniques to promote their ideal of the supremacy of the Aryan race, which led to the demonisation of Jews and the horrors of the Holocaust. People realised that one-sided, unchecked, state-inspired propaganda could have devastating consequences.

The techniques of propaganda are well established. At their most benign they aim to deliberately persuade a group of people to adopt a particular point of view. Some critics argue that PR is propaganda used on behalf of the commercial sector.

With the growth in PR-originated content in much of the contemporary media, there are dangers that if not operated responsibly, the modern PR industry could be accused of attempts at manipulating public opinion. These issues are discussed in detail below.

Barnum was an infamous, historical example of a press agent but does the press agency/publicity model have any relevance today? It does indeed describe the work of *some* PR practitioners. Look, for example, at the pages of tabloid newspapers and celebrity magazines, or television and radio chat shows when a new film or book is launched – the stars are all there plugging their latest project. Even the so-called ‘exclusive’ pictures of a semi-naked celebrity on a beach in a Sunday newspaper can sometimes be the result of a collusion between the star’s publicist and a photographer. In the UK, the activities of Max Clifford, and others like him, are the modern equivalent of the 19th century publicist/press agent – although interestingly Clifford denies that he is a publicist (see Case Study, page 206). And although the phrase has sometimes acquired pejorative connotations, it also describes the way that many small and medium-sized PR practitioners operate by attempting to generate as much publicity as possible for their clients.

The public information model

Grunig and Hunt’s second model is based on the way PR was practised by the big companies that dominated some sections of the US economy in the latter part of the 19th and the early 20th century. Their public information model is based upon the work of Ivy Lee and the ‘public be informed’ approach where information is sent out by an organisation. It is still a one-way process as in the press agency model, with information flowing from an organisation to recipients. The intention is to persuade, but crucially – and here is the real difference from the press agency

mode – there is no attempt to deceive the recipients. The public information model is based on an honest approach to communications. The role of the in-house PR practitioner is to transmit information objectively, reporting on the company just as a journalist would (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). A modern example of such a campaign would be a public information campaign such as the anti-smoking campaign launched by the UK government in 2009, which aimed to show parents who smoke how much their teenage children worried about their future health.

Writing in 1984, Grunig and Hunt argued that the Public Information Model was the way that most companies practised PR at the time. It was also characteristic of the way the public and voluntary sectors, education organisations, and non-profit organisations practised communication. These organisations communicate information about themselves using a variety of methods – not just news releases but also newspapers, guidebooks – and these would now include electronic communication such as websites.

The two-way asymmetric model

To Grunig and Hunt this model is characteristic of the type of PR practised from the mid 1920s through to the 1950s and is associated with the work of Edward Bernays, who attempted to provide a scientific basis for communication. Two-way asymmetric communication shares many features with the press agency model, though the major difference between them is that the two-way asymmetric model attempts ‘scientific persuasion’ rather than the crude and sometimes manipulative techniques used by publicists. The communication, however, is still all one way (asymmetric) from the organisation to the target audience, and the attempt is to persuade those on the receiving end of PR campaigns to take a form of action, whether to buy a product or in the case of a charity to support its campaigns. The communication is aimed at changing one type of behaviour to another. There is no dialogue or communication with the audience, or if there is it is only in order to improve the sales message.

What makes it different from the previous two models is persuasion. This is the type of communication practised, for example, when a company wants to try to persuade consumers to buy its products. It is also, arguably, the most dominant model practised by PR consultancies working on behalf of their clients. In the two-way asymmetric model, the communicator gets feedback from the public and then applies it to the latest communication and persuasion theories to persuade that audience to accept the organisation’s point of view.

The two-way symmetric model

In terms of historical development the model of the modern era is the practice of two-way symmetrical communication. The key characteristic of this model is

that the company engages in a real dialogue with stakeholders – not just to persuade, but also to listen, learn and, most importantly, to adapt organisational behaviour as a result of the communication process. In contrast to linear one-way communication models this is intended to be a circular two-way process, with the parties engaged in communication on equal terms.

Two-way symmetric public relations is supposed to rely on an honest two-way communication with give and take rather than one-way persuasion, focusing on mutual respect and efforts to achieve a mutual understanding between parties. Negotiation and a willingness to adapt and compromise are important elements in this process. It requires organisations engaging in public relations to be willing to make significant adjustments in how they operate in order to accommodate their publics or audiences. Significantly, it appears to be used more by non-profit organisations, government agencies and regulated bodies rather than by competitive, profit-driven companies. South Shropshire Council (2006) for example, in its statement of principles, stated it would operate in a two-way symmetrical manner as a matter of policy.

The Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Trust, in its 2006/07 'Communications Strategy', states that its aim is: 'To protect and enhance the reputation of the Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Trust'. The principles supporting this aim are:

- Good, honest and open two-way communication. This is the lifeblood of any successful operation.
- Strong communication with stakeholders. This is essential to how the organisation works and provides services.
- Clear communication. All written, spoken and electronic communications should be clear, easily understood, timely, and up to date.

Without it being openly stated, this is two-way symmetric communication in action.

While, with some credence, Grunig and Hunt could point to historical practice to substantiate the other models, the evidence for the symmetric model in 1984 was rather thin. Their research estimated that 15% of all in-house PR practitioners used two-way symmetric communication (15% of organisations practised press agency/publicity, 50% public information and 20% two-way asymmetric communication). However PR practitioners working in consultancies were in 1984 only starting to practise it. So it remained more of an ideal, the way that many believed PR should be undertaken. It was only with the research that Grunig and others carried out for the excellence project (see below) that enough evidence was accumulated to suggest that the best way to successfully practise PR was symmetric communications.

In later work James Grunig (1992) had to accept that, in practice, the idea of 'the best' model was irrelevant because organisations used communications that were relevant to the environment in which they operated. Different circumstances demanded different solutions and organisations will use a combination of

models depending on their specific circumstances. They may, for example, as an overall principle, say that they will operate in a two-way symmetric manner, but might find that on starting a campaign to support the launch of a new product they must then utilise asymmetric communications in order to boost sales.

The excellence project

The excellence project matters to PR because the depth of the research and the conclusions drawn from it have made a contribution to the way PR is practised and it has been a stimulus to academic research in the subject. 'Over 20 years, a leading body of work has developed around excellence theory, which has probably done more to develop public relations theory and scholarship than any other single school of thought. Its founder, James Grunig, is the most widely recognised public relations scholar' (Botan & Hazelton, 2006: 6). Magda Pieczka (L'Etang and Pieczka, 2006: 348) also agree with the influence that James Grunig has had, stating that his work: 'Provides a theoretical basis for public relations claiming for it the status as an academic discipline'.

The idea of building 'excellence' in a company was a popular management theory in the 1980s and was developed by the management theorist, Tom Peters. In his book, *In Search of Excellence* (1982), co-written with Robert H. Waterman, Peters profiled 43 different companies and identified the eight basic principles that made them successful. Becoming an 'excellent' company meant becoming a leader in its sector, a world-class company, respected and admired by others, and this could be achieved by any company provided they followed the practices identified by Peters and Waterman. In applying this to PR, what Grunig and his team looked for were those factors that would enable every company to practise excellent PR.

Grunig and a team of academics – Larissa Grunig, David Dozier, William Ehling, Jon White, and the only PR practitioner, Fred Repper – started their research in 1985 with a grant of £400,000 from the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). The aim of their research was to identify how and why PR gives value to an organisation and they sought answers to the following questions:

- 1 When and why are the efforts of communications practitioners effective?
- 2 How do organisations benefit from effective public relations?
- 3 Why do organisations practise PR in different ways?

(L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006)

They undertook a huge research programme looking at the practice of PR in the USA and UK, with the aim of producing an action programme that companies could follow in order to practise excellent PR.

The research conclusions were published in an influential book, *Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management* (1992), which was a practical guide for in-house and external PR practitioners that demonstrated how to achieve excellence in communication for their organisation. It analysed excellent PR on four different levels:

- Programme level: why, when, and how individual communication programmes were implemented.
- Departmental level: how PR departments operated and fitted in with other departments and the organisation as a whole.
- Organisational level: how an understanding of, and respect for communication processes and audience feedback could impact on the organisation.
- Economic level: how the tangible value to the organisation provided by excellent PR could produce happy internal and external audiences.

So how is excellence theory applied to PR? At its heart is the following proposition about the role of PR:

Public Relations contributes to organisational effectiveness when it helps to reconcile the organisation's goals with the expectations of its strategic constituencies. This contribution has monetary value to the organisation. Public Relations contributes to effectiveness by building quality long-term relationships with strategic constituencies. Public Relations is most likely to contribute to effectiveness when the senior PR manager is a member of the dominant coalition (that is the ruling group who actually run a company) where he or she is able to shape the organisation's goals and help determine which external publics are most strategic. (Grunig, 1992: 156)

To really provide value to an organisation and to achieve excellence in communications, PR practitioners must be working at the highest levels in the boardroom. The issue of the role PR plays in a company and whether it should have any influence or input into the strategic decision-making of a company is a crucially important one that we will return to in later chapters. Grunig's research also provided the practical evidence to support Grunig and Hunt's earlier argument that the practice of symmetrical communication was the most effective of the four models. They asserted that two-way symmetric communication was the foundation for excellent PR practice and that the value of PR comes from the relationships that organisations develop and maintain with their publics.

There have been criticisms of the excellence theory and Grunig continues to develop it in light of changing situations and circumstances. One major criticism is that it aligns the PR function in a company too closely with management and PR then becomes a management tool that might be used to justify appalling environmental or labour practices. For example, many of the companies that Ivy

Lee worked for were terrible employers and the fact that he improved their public image by telling their side of the story didn't make them better employers. This can sometimes place the PR practitioner in a difficult place ethically if they do not agree with the actions and activities of a company. The ethical dimension of PR will be explored in Chapter 6.

Magda Pieczka (2006) has questioned the basis upon which Grunig's research was carried out, arguing that the nature of the research determined the outcome and that the nature of the research questions limited the answers. The assumptions present in the questions meant the researchers were basically determining the outcome, which is to support the management role of PR.

Pieczka (2006: 355) criticises those who 'believe' in the excellence theory – they have, she argues, the characteristics of religious converts: 'One finds a somewhat proselytising approach emanating from the theory of excellent public relations: if public relations practitioners resist or do not understand the excellence ideas, it is because they do not know any better, even if through no fault of their own'. Quoting Grunig (1992), she claims that his comments are patronising: 'Practitioners often do not understand or accept theories like ours because they work from a pragmatic or conservative world-view. We argue that practitioners with a pragmatic worldview have symmetrical presuppositions even though they do not realise it. They take an asymmetrical view, usually a conservative one, because their clients hold that view'.

Excellence theory is not the only PR theory but it has achieved its dominant position partly because of the level of support for it amongst the powerful US PR academics and partly because it provides an acceptable theoretical justification for PR. The symmetrical company is an ideal. Pieczka (2006: 355) describes excellence theory as: 'The proselytizing of the rather heavenly "symmetrical" communication model which would allow young students (and teachers) to feel good about their occupation'. If it is practised it is likely to be in public sector organisations but there has been too little research into this field to identify how far the practice goes.

Why then should we still continue to study excellence theory if it only applies to a limited number of organisations? Its significance is the contribution that it has made to the development of PR theory: it was 'The first cohesive theoretical effort to make scientific sense of public relations work and tie it to essential research and evaluation. Excellence Theory focused on organisational relationships and the attainment of managerial power and influence for the PR role. A key assumption of the dominant paradigm seems to be that academic work should directly contribute to practice'. It raised the status of PR research by presenting PR 'As an outgrowth of management sciences, to democratic and functional. By linking the discipline to other scientific disciplines, public relations could gain a respectable academic status that could deliver "strategic" communicators worthy of boardroom status' (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006: 252).

That so few organisations actually practise symmetrical communications led Grunig to adapt his theory, introducing elements of game theory to produce a model

which effectively utilises and combines asymmetric and symmetric communication. This model is a continuum, with the company at one end and the public at the other. At the far end of each the public and company engage in asymmetric practices. In the middle of the continuum, the organisation and public meet and create opportunities that are beneficial to each of them. When this happens, it is a win-win situation for both the company and the public.

Theories rise and fall, change and develop. No theory is immutable, particularly in the social sciences, and this is so with the excellence theory. Alternative frameworks are emerging, although one problem with many of them is that they still share many of the fundamental assumptions of the dominant theory.

One alternative that has developed outside the dominant paradigm and is independent from it is the Critical Paradigm, but even this still has to use the excellence theory as a reference point (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006). The Critical Paradigm: 'Points out the limitation of systems by asking hard questions about the possession and use of power, the nature of authority, morality and political economy. Critical academics explore questions about propaganda, corporate power, the public sphere culture and commodification' (2006: 256).

SUMMARY

This chapter has deliberately covered a lot of ground and should, among other things, illustrate what a complex subject this is. Communication theory can help PR practitioners understand why some campaigns work and others do not. However, PR is not solely based on communication theory: the history of PR has contributed to the growth of PR theory and in turn helped to develop its practice.

The current dominant paradigm in PR is the excellence theory which argues that the most effective form of both external and internal communication is symmetrical communication. This means that organisations must engage in a constructive two-way communication with stakeholders, but in addition should be prepared to change policy as a result of that dialogue. The most effective companies practising excellent PR have the PR function operating at the highest level in the company. For most businesses however PR practice tends to be pragmatic and to use a number of different PR models depending on the situation and circumstances.

What students should draw from this chapter is that PR is not a static subject – it is constantly developing, changing, and adapting to new circumstances and situations. For new entrants this opens up many exciting possibilities, and equipped with the right skills, the desire to succeed and a commitment to hard work, new PR practitioners will have the opportunity to make an impact.