A Systematic Review of 40 Years of Public Relations Evaluation and Measurement Research: Looking into the Past, the Present, and the Future

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Research interest: The need for a systematic consolidation of extant scholarship

The evaluation and measurement of public relations (PR) have been a perennial topic for scholars since the early beginnings of academic research (Stacks & Michaelson, 2014). Over the course of time, questions related to evaluation have been listed among the top research priorities of PR scholarship (Synott & McKie, 1997; Watson, 2008). Yet, albeit extensive discussion, scholars have not achieved consensus on how to convincingly measure the impact of communication (Likely & Watson, 2013). In light of today’s large academic knowledge base, it is surprising that little research has so far investigated the field from a reflective perspective (Macnamara, 2014). The few existing literature reviews emphasized professional topics employing historical and narrative approaches, but were not devoted to systematically gathering the state of the art of evaluation and measurement research.

Given the lack of a standardized analysis, there is a strong need for consolidation of existing scholarly work. To close this gap, this research reports the findings of a large-scale project reviewing the academic literature to sculpt a better understanding of (a) what has been researched in the past, (b) how the research is interrelated, and (c) what still needs to be investigated in the future, guided by the following prime research question:

What is the status quo of the academic discussion within measurement and evaluation research published in peer-reviewed journals from 1975 to 2015

Who are the authors contributing to the debate?
What are the topical trends over the course of 40 years?
Which major theories are mentioned and applied?
Which prime methods are applied in empirical studies?
Which underlying paradigms do the authors represent?
Which disciplinary scientific communities contribute to the research?

Methodological design

- Sampling base: Most important peer-reviewed, English-speaking journals dedicated to the domain of PR and communication research
- Data collection: Systematic full-text search strategy based on five search terms (evaluat*, measur*, effect*, value*, and intangible*)
- Data set: 324 journal articles published between 1975 and 2015, selected out of a total of 8,491 located scholarly contributions
- Data analysis: Data extraction form using Excel®, combination of open coding and look-up tables, first-order and second-order analysis

Journals reviewed

Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal
Corporate Communications: An International Journal
Corporate Reputation Review
International Journal of Strategic Communication
Journal of Business Communication
Journal of Business Ethics
Journal of Communication Management
Journal of Public Relations Research
Management Communication Quarterly
Public Relations Inquiry
Public Relations Review
PRism
Findings: Overview of the past research and the current state of knowledge

- Enduring publication trend and significant increase of publications particularly during the last decade
- Dominance of Anglo-American authorship, however, growing trend towards more geographic diversity since the mid-1990s, concurrent with the launch of new journals
- Shifting topical focus from inquiries into professional topics such as applied method research towards measurement of relationships and reputation, and recently, value creation
- Paucity of theory-driven works, but application of a multitude of different theoretical frameworks, most frequently excellence theory, reputation management theory, or crisis communication theory
- Fixation on empirical research, primarily based on quantitative approaches employing mostly survey designs
- Absolute prevalence of the functionalistic managerial paradigm, only scarce evidence of alternative thinking
- Considerable impact of management science since the 1990s and rise of interdisciplinary research

Synthesis: A new perspective on the academic discussion

- Transition from self-referential PR evaluation towards a more comprehensive understanding, characterized by a widening of classical PR scholarship to include interdisciplinary thinking and study diverse effect levels
- Isolated focus on a single outcome (e.g., reputation) and equation with overall communication value
- Emerging trend towards a more holistic view, i.e. how communication creates social capital or intangible capital, borrowing from sociological or political thinking and management literature
- General underestimation of the indirect and hidden value contributions of communication, e.g. cost reduction through crisis prevention based on monitoring or listening
- Growing intra- and interdisciplinary fragmentation of scholarship into subfields, with each subfield applying distinct theoretical frameworks and producing own journals
- Convergences of subfields on the relational aspects of communication
- Lack of a holistic theory and measurement approach to demonstrate how communication contributes value

Research Agenda: A road map for future inquiries

- More developed theory, e.g., through inclusion of co-creation theory, network theory, or social capital theory, along with theoretical enhancement of relationship and reputation theory
- More sophisticated operationalization, based on valid and reliable indicators that separate causes from effects and consider adequately the influence of a range of mediating and moderating factors
- Increased methodological variance and rigorfulness, employing multi-method designs and more dynamic and process-oriented methodologies, alongside more qualitative approaches

Conclusion: Moving into the fifth decade of evaluation and measurement research

- More interdisciplinary and integrative research endeavors required to demonstrate adequately how the entirety of communication effects are linked to overall organizational goals
- Need to measure the value-contribution of communication holistically, based on a multidimensional and multi-indexed approach
- Increased exchange of knowledge between academia and the communication industry advocated to foster progress and jointly shape the future evaluation and measurement debate