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Public relations expertise deconstructed

Magda Pieczka
STIRLING MEDIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE, STIRLING UNIVERSITY, SCOTLAND

Introduction

This article is about public relations expertise. It presents the results of an extensive empirical enquiry and is framed by the concept of profession and the sociological debates that surround it.[1] A profession is understood as 'an occupation which has assumed a dominant position in the division of labour, so that it gains control over the determination and substance of its own work' (Friedson, 1970). Since my interest is not in ascertaining the status of public relations, 'occupation' and 'profession' may be used interchangeably. What is of central interest, however, is the role knowledge plays in the constitution of the profession and particularly in the links between knowledge and professional practice. Abstract knowledge has been considered a defining feature of the professions by all schools of thought in the sociology of the professions. Here I follow Abbott's ideas, specifically his claim that professional work is constituted by tasks which the profession has successfully claimed for itself. 'The tasks of professions are human problems amenable to expert service' (Abbott, 1988: 35). The hold a profession establishes over a set of tasks is known as *jurisdiction*. Jurisdictions are maintained, extended and redefined on the basis of 'a knowledge system governed by abstractions [because only abstraction] can redefine [the profession's] problems and tasks, defend them from interlopers, and seize new problems . . .' (Abbott, 1988).

The body of abstract professional knowledge, i.e. its cognitive base, is codified in textbooks. However, the application of that knowledge in professional practice is a complex operation. The discrepancy between knowing and doing in the professional context has been described as the difference between 'book knowledge' and 'first-hand experience'

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(Friedson, 1970). In terms of internal structuring of the professions, there may be distinct groups of professionals, those who produce the abstract knowledge and those who apply it in practice.

Given the fragmentary and poorly developed body of abstract knowledge in public relations and its weak institutional basis in academia, we need to understand more about the basis and nature of the expert services practitioners sell to their clients.

If we cannot assume that public relations practice is based on the application of a body of abstract knowledge, what is it based on? What is public relations expertise? For the purposes of this article, public relations expertise is defined as a body of practical knowledge which makes it possible for public relations practice to exist. *Practice* is to be understood both as what an individual public relations worker does and, perhaps more emphatically, as tasks and techniques shared by the occupational group.

I have excluded questions about public relations textbook knowledge, the formal education of practitioners, and the status of the profession. Instead, I have followed, to use Bourdieu's phrase, the logic of its practice. If answering the earlier questions might tell us something about, for example, the bad press the profession consistently receives (at least in the UK), understanding the logic of its practice tells us how and why the occupational group is the way it is, how it manages to capture new markets and why it survives.

In fact, the material presented in this article seems to lend itself to Bourdieu's ideas with some stimulating results. Public relations practice can be understood as emerging from a particular habitus, i.e.'the system of structured, structuring dispositions' which is 'constituted in practice and which constructs the objects of knowledge' (Bourdieu, 1992: 52):

> The practical world that is constituted in the relationship with the *habitus,* acting as a system of cognitive and motivational structures, is a world of already realized ends – procedures to follow, paths to take. . . . (Bourdieu, 1992: 53)

But '[p]ractice has a logic which is not that of a logician', says Bourdieu (1992: 86) reiterating arguments made by ethnomethodologists, and phenomenological thinkers before them (Pieczka, 1997). By focusing on training and the transmission of expertise, this research project deals largely with accounts of practice, which are possible only if they embody a certain level of reflexivity (absent from the practice itself) and a theorizing effort. The latter here means a discursive practice of translating one order of things (direct experience) into another (descriptions of the former, which may be offered in more or less theoretical, abstract terms). And this is precisely what public relations training seems to do:

> In your job [. . .] you build up a huge knowledge of examples and in the examples come all kind of rules and ways of doing things. The hard thing in

doing a presentation like this – I guess it is the reason why it's quite good for people like me to do it – is that it forces you to get it out, sit down and work out why it is you say all these things.' (Interview with trainer, 24/7/98a)

Locating expertise

Data for this article were gathered during participant observation of a three-week training course offered on a commercial basis in London in 1998 to an international group of practitioners. The trainers, with one notable exception (myself), were senior British public relations practitioners drawn from consultancies or in-house departments, or were full-time trainers exclusively. A number were past Presidents of the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) in the UK, or otherwise well-known names in the occupation. I participated in the course both as a trainer, an observer, and a full participant when invited to join in the practical activities by the students themselves. Data were gathered in the form of field notes, handouts distributed to the students and interviews with 13 trainers.[2] Analysis was carried out in stages through a process of open coding. The interviews were analysed separately, with a different set of categories related to the interview guide.

Another data-set consisted of 111 entries to the Sword of Excellence, an annual IPR competition for the best public relations campaign. As an illustration of the format of the competition, in 1998 there were 10 categories: City and financial; Internal communication; Public affairs; Consumer public relations; Industry and commerce; Issue and crisis management; Not-for-profit organization; Low budget programmes (under £10,000); Support of sponsorship; and Use of new technology. Each category may or may not have a winner in any given year, as well as a number of Certificates of Excellence awarded, effectively runners-up prizes. The best campaign in any given year is awarded The Sword of Excellence.

Entries must comply with the following rules:

> Individuals or organisations are required to submit a *summary no longer than three A4 pages (maximum 1500 words)* to describe a programme and cover points that include:
>
> - The information stage – analysis, research and definition of operational objectives.
> - The planning stage – drawing up a strategy and costed plan of action.
> - The action stage – communicating and carrying out the programme.
> - The measurement stage – monitoring and evaluating process, results, and budgets; re-assessment and modification of programme as necessary. This should preferably include evaluative comment from the chief executive of the organisation for whom the programme was designed. (Institute of Public Relations, 1998; emphasis in original)

The cases were selected from the 1984–88 and 1990–98 published summaries of the campaigns chosen as winners in their categories by the IPR panel of judges.[3] The summaries have all been written by the entrants to the competition themselves, according to the competition guidelines, and reproduced without any substantive changes in a special ‘case history’ publication published at the end of the annual round.

Three components of public relations expertise

Professional expertise emerges from the analysis as a body of practical knowledge, diverse in its nature, and intricately structured. Its component parts are identified here as: picture of the world; conceptual frame; and professional knowledge, the last of which is composed of problems, tools and truths. Together they provide the occupation not only with the knowledge of what to do and how to do it, but they also enable the occupational group to read the world in which they practise in a way that makes it possible for them to lay a claim to their own jurisdiction. The following discussion will therefore proceed to describe each of the component parts and explain the function they play in the overall architecture of public relations expertise.

Picture of the world

‘It’s a changed world and it’s a highly challenging world’ (Training session, 23/7/98a). This statement is perhaps the best summary of both the picture of the world that emerges from the training observed and the reason for paying it the attention it receives here. As seen through the eyes of the trainers and as explained to the students, the world is being fundamentally reconfigured.

Reconfiguration

PR practitioners evidently believe that power in society is moving away from its traditional centres in government and business and spreading over a wider social base; national boundaries are reconfigured as regional and global at the same time; legitimacy is defined away from the narrow understanding of what is legal and increasingly in terms of what is moral; citizenship is expressed through consumership, and all this is fuelled by the technological changes in communication and the resulting changes in the mass media. The interaction of these changes is well illustrated in the following statement:

> As a result of digitalization and the expansion of the Internet, individuals have become global citizens and consumers. [. . .] Companies now face a media

> environment shaping and determining the way they are perceived and evaluated on a global basis, twenty-four hours a day. [. . .] Active management of reputation, combined with relationship management of stakeholders . . . has become a strategic need, not just nationally, but regionally and on a global basis.' (Training session, 20/7/98a)

The world is seen as becoming more homogeneous: it shares 'increasingly similar political, civil and economic institutions' (Training session, 20/7/98a); it shares aspirations – 'international competitiveness and world class standards drive and shape the best national and international organizations' (Training session, 31/7/98a), and ideas of prosperity – 'virtually every country wants to get the same industries' (Training session, 21/7/98a).

If the future appears as an extension of the present, the present takes shape in opposition to the past. The theme of the Old and the New identified in the analysis is a mixture of data from research companies such as MORI or Gallup, and an extrapolation of ideas from management gurus such as Charles Handy, Carl Naisbitt, Michael Porter, and Tom Peters; sources such as *The Economist*, *Financial Times*, *Fortune* and *Reputation Management*, and business peers such as Michael Morley, Vice Chairman of Edelman; Jim MacNamara, CEO Asia/Pacific, Carma International; and Chris Green, Campaign Director, Greenpeace. The exact provenance of the ideas is almost impossible to establish as the presentation conventions of training do not seem to require that sources be acknowledged. What occurs, effectively, is the production and reproduction of popular knowledge.

The juxtaposition of the Old and the New shows that people are becoming more pessimistic about the general standards of knowledge, honesty and health; more critical of big business in general with decreasing ratings for its ability to balance public interest with profit considerations; and more suspicious of the benefits of controversial industries such as chemicals.

Perhaps the most comprehensive expression of the change over time was presented by an external affairs specialist of a major oil company, under the heading of 'Public Attitudes to Corporate Power', as summarized in Figure 1.

This juxtaposition claims that the old structures of the social and economic world have been disappearing. Although statistics were quoted to substantiate this perception, there was also a certain nostalgia present in this evocation of a world where business was trusted and free to operate the most 'logical' economies of scale. It has to be pointed out here that it was precisely the wide public distrust of big business in the US in the late 19th century that gave the impetus for the development of corporate public relations, or perhaps even modern public relations as such (Marchand, 1998). Alongside the old structures, the old certainties and controls are also disappearing. For example, the company's ability to control customers'

FIGURE 1
Public attitudes to corporate power

Then	**Now**
trust granted	mistrust, scrutiny, questioning; perceived behaviour, less tolerant, less respectful
ownership	stewardship, stakeholder expansion
freedom within the law	licence to operate, responsibility
economics of scale/integrated operations	disaggregation and market test, e.g. diversification, joint ventures, alliances
big is best	big is too powerful, inefficient
the big employers = people confidentiality respected	no accountability = systems transparency demanded
government's problem	industry's problem

Source: Training presentation, 23/7/98a.

access to information about itself and its products is seen as significantly altered by the advances in information technology. This mixture of the historical, the nostalgic, and the wished-for is well illustrated by another chart used in the same training session: 'External Affairs Role in Transition' organized as Past (reactive, non-mainstream, separate from management), Present (moving to active role, taking place on management teams) and Future (integrated part of management team, creating competitive advantage, competitive tool, pool of expertise).

Response

Whether or not factually accurate, the perception of change is accompanied by a clear response in terms of business's understanding of its own place in the social world, and with it, to use a grand term, of public relations' philosophical grounding, in the words of some of the trainers:

> Business today has a new bottom line – public acceptance. (Training session, 23/7/98a)

> . . . not just delivering economic but also environmental and social equity goals – the so called Triple Bottom Line. (Training session, 20/7/98a)

> I thought licence to operate only applied to the nuclear energy business, but with expectations of corporate behaviour and greater media capacity to focus in on the issues, increasingly food, pharmaceutical, hotels and financial services companies are under scrutiny. (Training session, 20/7/98a)

The principle of public acceptance has given business a basis from which to re-establish its legitimacy. The process, in practice, is a continuous tense re-negotiation of areas over which the principle extends, starting historically, according to one of the trainers, with the spectacularly controversial issue of nuclear power, but gradually including more and more areas. These areas of public life, called issues, are 'environment, human and political rights, animal rights, aid and economic development, consumerism, food safety, health, religion' (Training session, 3/8/98a). Risk was hardly mentioned by the trainers, yet it seems that the principle of public acceptance is linked, on the one hand, to the gradual widening of the scope of risk and risk management; and on the other hand to a retreat from the worldview of watertight divisions between the economic, moral and social spheres of public life.

Although the main, the most public, as it were, line of response has been to accept the idea of 'licence to operate' (defined by one trainer as 'social acceptability of corporate action', Training session, 3/8/98a), closer analysis shows that there have been a number of smaller strategies in use which simultaneously limit and operationalize this principle in business practice. These strategies can be labelled instrumentalism and evasion.

The most obvious example of the instrumental approach to problems thrown up by the fundamental reconfiguration of the world is the introduction of a toolkit of ideas and tactics, such as: stakeholder, issues management, crisis management, social corporate responsibility. All of these appeared in the training either as separate sessions, or ideas used by trainers. Instrumentalization of these ideas and tactics is two-fold: they are there to be used; and the way in which they work defines the nature of engagement with the problems.

Let us take as an example social corporate responsibility (referred to as 'responsibility') and follow it through a number of statements made by the trainers. It is defined as 'the responsibility of an organization to its stakeholders beyond its duties to its members . . . [it] involves choices based on ethical and moral principles, not processes of accountability' (Training session, 31/7/98a). Thus social responsibility lies in 'our contribution to social/societal goals' (Training session, 31/7/98a) which is above and beyond the basic duties of profitability and accountability. It is also very clearly allied with the principle of freedom, fundamental to Western culture; and with the Western myth of growth and development:

> Is [social responsibility] an issue for multinationals only? Not if you want to be world class. . . . Not if you want to compete in your own market. . . . Not if you want national economic growth. [Yes] only if you enjoy decline or economic imperialism. (Training session, 31/7/98a)

The rhetorical 'you' constructed here is being presented with an apparent choice: to embrace social responsibility in the way in which the exemplars of business success, i.e. multinationals, do; or to turn your back on it, and thereby condemn yourself to inevitable decline and failure. Social responsibility is being bracketed with freedom and growth as attractive aspirations, as opposed to economic imperialism, commercial selfishness and decline.

Another, parallel type of alignment is being articulated in the above statement: if moral principles are evoked, so are pragmatic, business ones – competitiveness and reputation. Indeed, this pragmatic alignment takes over when responsibility becomes part of the communication expertise claimed by public relations/communication management.

> Why be socially responsible? Survival, recruitment, acceptability, motivation through the organization, investment, secure support for the future change. (Training session, 31/7/98a)

Social responsibility gets operationalized purely with reference to the organization's identity and technical issues of credibility:

> Social responsibility should always relate to corporate goals, the business plan or operational objectives; [social responsibility is] most effective at community level; involving employees and management secures commitment – essential; needs to be appropriate in scale to your organization . . . initiatives must be monitored and evaluated. (Training session, 31/7/98a)

Thus through a process of reinterpretation we are being moved from a position of clear separation of different kinds of considerations (ethical and economic) to a position where the two are supposed to blend into one, but instead the ethical considerations seem to be circumscribed.

> So, a Ford European environmental award [was] needed to persuade the vehicle-buying public that Ford Motor Company was more than a manufacturer of reliable cars and trucks, [and] also had a stake in the future of the environment and had the good of society at heart. To a certain extent it succeeded. *Environment can equal responsibility in the public perception*. (Training session, 31/7/98b, emphasis added)

The effect of this instrumental approach is double-edged: social responsibility is included in good business practice, but it is also made ambiguous by the mode of its inclusion. In fact, good business practice itself is a result of the same re-interpretation process whereby ethical considerations can be imported into business thinking with no fundamental rethinking of business principles being involved. To put it crudely, if you re-name it, you do not therefore have to re-think it:

> Is keeping employees informed a moral issue? The majority view seems to be that it is a business issue. It is part of standard good ways in which to run a business. (Training session, 24/7/98a)

The answer is evasive, but at least the question is asked. Evasion, however, can be extended to the point where the need for any re-evaluation does not even arise. This seems to happen when problematic issues are evaded through the use of frameworks which are otherwise legitimate or comprehensive in their own right. For example, seeing the world in terms of purely business relations or in purely economic terms helps to evade more troublesome ethical questions which could not be dealt with as ‘good business practice’:

> In China, government support is particularly crucial to the success of a foreign venture, since the government develops the policies and laws that rule an organization’s operation, controls the multitude of approvals that allow your business to operate day-to-day and *is often your partner, customer and supplier*. (Training session, 20/7/98b, emphasis added)

> As a reaction against increasing EU restrictions, tobacco companies are also going heavily into other markets – *the Middle East, Far East and Africa – where markets are growing, not declining*. (Training session, 30/7/98a, emphasis added)

Finally, the clearest evasive technique of all is that of redistribution of responsibility:

> It is difficult to have a debate with stakeholders in the tobacco industry or nuclear industry because it is such a polarized issue. (Training session, 20/7/98a)

> It’s not for a single company to solve big governance issues for the whole society. (Training session, 23/7/98a)

Which world?

So far, it seems that there is a fairly sharp picture of the world emerging together with a clear professional communication/management response to it. The picture may be sharp, but it is not without its own contradictions and tensions. This world seems to extend between the New Utopia and Dystopia.

In the utopian vision, business works together with government (whose role is declining) and with civil society to ‘create a dialogue with a whole range of new stakeholders to find common ground’ (Training session, 20/7/98a). Business compliance with legislation is replaced by the prerogative of earning social trust and approval. Crises are avoided by successful anticipation of issues due to ‘creative use of communication technology’ (Training session, 20/7/98a); and universities participate in the ‘building [of] the shared planetary mind’ (Training session, 20/7/98a).

Yet, the ‘sameness’ of the world may not be making it any more predictable or easier to deal with:

> Establishment and maintenance of trust and confidence is an increasing problem in a fast moving world where change is taking place all the time and people come and go and alter their loyalties as a matter of course. (Training session, 29/7/98a)

The unpredictability of the world lies at the core of an alternative vision, the New Dystopia.

Reason and emotion

At the foundation of the New Dystopia lies the old division between logic/ reason and emotion.

> Public opinion is increasingly a part of what we do, so are the emotional factors. (Training session, 20/7/98a)
>
> You can't rely on the rational arguments only. (Training session, 21/7/98b)
>
> [In] a battle between facts and emotions, emotions usually win the day. Don't just count on logic. (Training session, 28/7/98a)

The division can no longer be denied; in the New Utopia, however, the split can be repaired. In fact, the ambition to reunite reason with emotion is a driving force in the New Utopia,

> The old paradigm of defensive stance must be replaced by a high profile in public debate and facts and science working hand in glove with emotions and perceptions. (Training session, 20/7/98a)

Yet, as we have seen, people 'come and go' and routinely refuse to be locked into relationships with organizations. They may refuse to value what you do and therefore to like you, as was demonstrated to the trainees with a MORI chart showing that satisfaction with a company's service is not linked to favourable attitudes towards it. It seems that this unmanageable fracture in the world is the location of the near mythical status of pressure groups in the public relations cosmology – Greenpeace either as itself or through references to the Brent Spar saga appeared in 7 out of 22 sessions (the next runner up was British Airways with four appearances). The New Dystopia is, therefore, the vision of the permanently fractured world, unpredictable, driven by emotion, and spinning on forever new issues.

One of the trainers produced two lists revealing this fault line in practitioners' comparative characterization of pressure groups and companies (see Figure 2).

The comparison, couched in loaded terms, sets emotion (pressure groups) against reason and science (companies); but it also reveals respect and recognition, if perhaps grudging, for qualities which would be praised in a public relations expert: well-informed, flexible, creative, professional, innovative, high PR skills. At least two other trainers who in the course of their sessions referred to pressure groups showed the same mixture of loathing and recognition. PR professionals recognize pressure groups as fundamentally like themselves in that they draw their power from the same source – their ability to impose discursive control over issues, sites of complex power struggles in public life. Yet, the purpose which pressure

FIGURE 2
Characteristics of pressure groups and companies

Pressure groups	**Companies**
single issue driven but coalitions building	driven by traditional market values
intolerant, manipulative, unscrupulous, self-righteous	tendency to decide-announce-defend policies
driven more by values and emotions than facts	understand science, understand relevant risk
distrust of business (look for, enjoy conflict) well-informed	becoming more aware of stakeholders
international networking	
flexible, innovative, creative, professional, self-perpetuating campaigners	still instinctively closed and suspicious
news-creating, publicity-hungry, high PR skills, search for simple solutions	tendency to over-claim problems with projecting trust and values

Source: Training session, 3/8/98a.

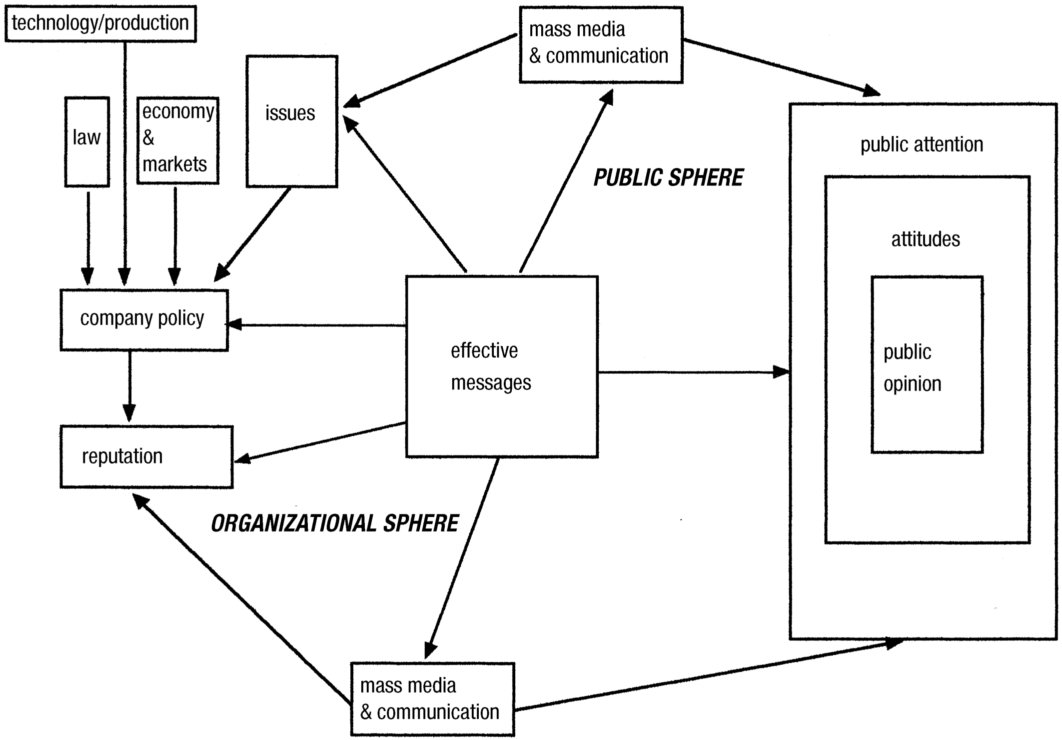
groups make this power serve is impossible to endorse for the PR occupation. As one trainer put it, ‘I find that when I’m describing pressure groups, I could be describing one of the more extreme religions’ (Training session, 3/8/98a). It seems that to PR professionals, pressure groups are in some ways twisted, frightening reflections of themselves.

Conceptual frame

If this loosely articulated picture of the world serves as the background, the conceptual frame pinpoints the space which the occupation calls its own and from which it gazes out into the world. The conceptual frame summons ideas and concepts, providing the occupation with a locus; it also directs the occupation’s attention towards others and other conceptual frames in a bid to improve status and secure both existing and new markets for public relations services.

One way to understand public relations expertise is by attending to its location in the world of action (see Figure 3): it is situated between client interests, whatever the expert’s particular relation with the client might be, and the sphere of public knowledge and opinion. For the time being we shall refer to this domain as ‘effective messages’ in order to reflect practitioners’ understanding of their work as helping ‘clients put their

FIGURE 3
Public relations' domain and lines of intervention



message across effectively' (Training session, 20/7/98b). 'Effective messages' straddle the boundary between the client and the general public. On the public side, public relations intervenes in matters of public knowledge and opinion, as seen in practitioners' explanations of their work as:

> . . . the creation and distribution of public attention. (Training session, 20/7/98a)
>
> Public opinion is increasingly a part of what we do. (Training session, 20/7/98a)
>
> Changing attitudes . . . is one of the most difficult parts of public relations. (Training session, 21/7/98a)

'Issues' come into the model to represent the area of debate and struggle between different interests in society, and like the public relations domain itself, straddle the boundary between the public and the client side of the diagram.

On the company side of the model, issues are taken up by companies under 'social and corporate responsibility'. The ultimate direction of efforts, however, goes to *reputation*, understood as a blend of business and non-business considerations (represented in the model by factors related to law, technology/production process; economy/markets; and issues). Practitioners, therefore, see their role in the following terms:

> Your responsibility is to advise your company . . . on the best policy. (Training session, 21/7/98b)
>
> Our work is to make sure that we know what needs to be communicated to protect the company's reputation. (Training session, 27/7/98a)
>
> Stakeholder philosophy [requires] the public relations function [to act] not just in its traditional box, but in tandem with other functions and close to the CEO, to co-ordinate knowledge management, correlating shareholder value and other business performance measures, such as productivity, innovation, quality, customer satisfaction with reputation, and developing methodologies for linking issues impacting on the company to company's involvement in broader activities than its traditional capitalist role. (Training session, 20/7/98a)

The lines of expert public relations intervention on the client side go to reputation, policy and issues.

The final element of the model, the mass media, reflects practitioners' views that 'Working with the media is a major aspect of public relations' (Training session, 27/7/98a). Within the model, the mass media are placed on the boundary between different kinds of interests, although what or whose interests they represent is a debatable matter. For clarity, mass media are shown as influenced by public relations efforts, although, as will be seen later, there is a strong influence going the opposite way.

At the core of public relations expertise lies the organization understood as a sense of corporate 'self' which is articulated and maintained in the face of a world full of challenges. This direction in the structuring of the expertise privileges the corporate entity but at the same time foregrounds the importance of the boundary between the corporate entity and its environment. The key concepts in this conceptual frame are: corporate identity, corporate culture, corporate reputation, and corporate image. Although there is extensive literature about these, both theoretical and applied, this did not seem of primary importance for trainers. Rather a systematic effort was made to link these concepts with others found in a managerial conceptual frame:

> Reputation management [is] the orchestration of discreet communications that are designed to protect your most valuable brand – your corporate reputation. (Training session, 20/7/98a)

> A strong sense of corporate identity is as important as slavish adherence to business unit financial results. (Training session, 21/7/98a)

> Nurturing corporate culture is useless unless the culture is aligned with a company's approach to competitiveness. (Training session, 21/7/98a)

> There is an almost straight line relationship between product recommendation and excellence of corporate image. . . . (Training session, 21/7/98a)

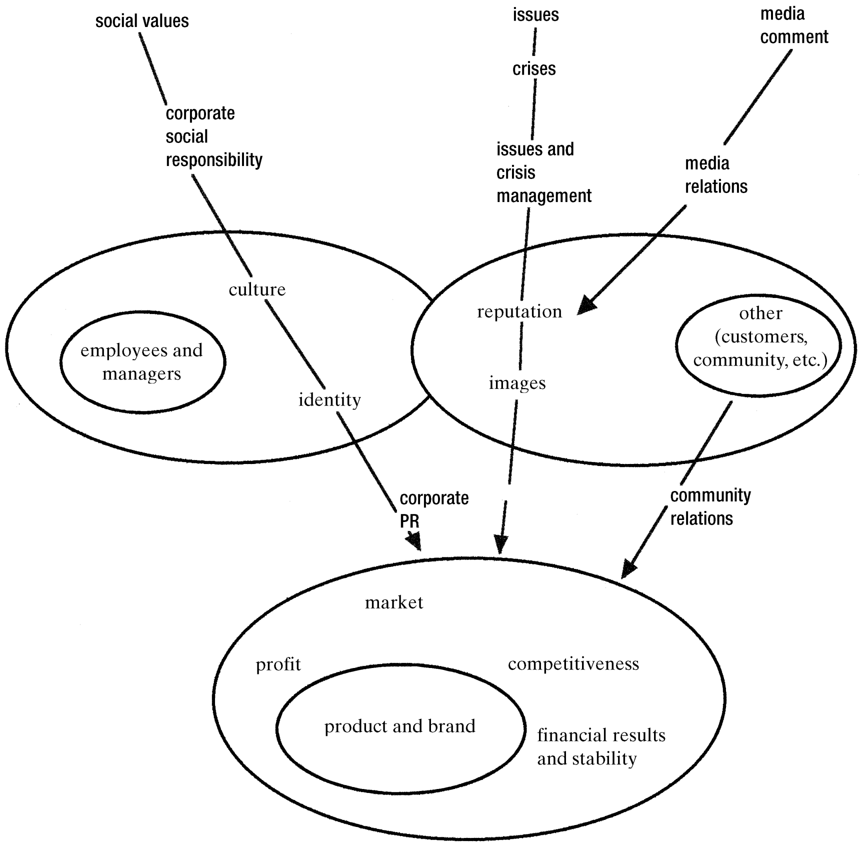
> The company's external brand and image is based on its internal culture. (Training session, 24/7/98a)

The dynamic interlocking of knowledge (as a conceptual frame), its location in relation to other kinds of knowledge and of action (as professional tools) is illustrated in Figure 4. The model is by no means a comprehensive map of public relations expertise, or even of its conceptual framework, but it captures the relationships between some of the key players, concepts, and public relations tools.

It is clear that the perspective adopted is that of looking outwards from inside the company. Thus at the company's core are its employees, and around them the corporate culture and identity, which do not just exist, but project towards 'others', i.e. stakeholders. They, on the other hand, have images of the company and form judgements about it, which are summarized as corporate reputation. In this symbolic realm, the organizational boundary is rather hazy, but it seems to lie somewhere where identity and reputation overlap.

The model, constructed from a body of discourse such as the five statements shown above, is structured through the systematic juxtaposition of concepts from two different frames. Concepts from the identity frame are counterposed to those which have traditionally provided the managerial/business *raison d'être*: reputation/brand, identity/financial results, culture/competitiveness, corporate image/product. What the model also illustrates is the fact that this opposition is being abolished through expert action; the symbolic is stitched onto the material, with public relations tools being the metaphorical needle and thread in this process. We

FIGURE 4
Public relations brings together the symbolic and the material



are, in effect, attempting to unravel the precise dynamics behind reputation strategy, explained by one of the trainers in the following way:

> The key notions are 'thought leadership', 'issue management', 'share of mind' and 'defining events' that are the building blocks of creating a reputation strategy. This thinking will be based on research among employees, customers, shareholders and 'secondary' stakeholders. Phrases such as trust, responsibility, innovation, financial soundness, quality of products, vision of management and companies that others try to emulate. (Training session, 20/7/98a)

Reality and perception

An important element of the public relations conceptual frame is the definition of reality. A clear ontological distinction is introduced: '. . . not a fact, but . . . a perception' (Training session, 21/7/98b); 'Perception, not reality' (Training session, 28/7/98b). Not only are perceptions and reality separate entities, they are also different in nature: facts are hard and immutable; perceptions seem to have shape-shifting qualities – they can take on or be given different shapes. In the words of one of the practitioners, 'It is possible to manipulate public perceptions, there is no doubt about it' (Training session, 29/7/98a). This quality of perception acquires a special significance for public relations practice when considered from a business point of view:

> Perceptions are a powerful fact in business, for example, brand perceptions. There are few CEOs who realize that perceptions are outcomes of organized, planned action. (Training session, 20/7/98a)

A space is opened up, in terms of action and ideas, for public relations practice. If perceptions matter in business terms, then whatever their essence, they function like hard facts. It can, therefore, be said that 'perception is reality' (Training session, 4/8/98a).

This simultaneous recognition and abolition of the difference between facts and perceptions not only underlies the conceptual effort of bringing together the symbolic and the material, but also of creating the space for occupational existence in the world of action, which as we have seen lies between the fully open public sphere and the less accessible regions of the organizational sphere; between the purely symbolic and the material.

Professional knowledge

In public relations, professional knowledge is made up of three elements: professional tools; problems to which these tools are applied; and, in the words of one of the trainers, 'truths which we hold to be self-evident' (Interview with trainer, 27/7/98a).

PR's problems

The analysis of 111 Sword of Excellence cases has revealed that public relations expertise appears to contain six types of broad problem areas: *product promotion; profile; corporate identity and culture; lobbying; public or health information campaigns*; and *presentation of special(ist) interests*. Problem areas have been defined on the basis of the information contained in the introductory parts of the cases which precede the statement of objectives chosen for a campaign. Consequently, a professional problem is defined here as practitioners' identification of the object towards which their overall professional effort is directed in a given case. The identification of the object is supported by conceptual frames, and language, available to the practitioner. There are a number of problem types.

Product promotion, taken literally, is a somewhat misleading label. In fact, it covers efforts directed primarily at commercial promotion, that is promotion with a financial gain in sight, of things conceived of as saleable commodity. A clearly identifiable problem subset is represented by campaigns dealing with flotations, privatization and share issues, i.e. selling a particular commodity (shares) in a tightly regulated market.

Profile refers to efforts directed at shaping the way in which a client organization is perceived publicly. One of the most direct examples of such an effort is the sponsorship of pub theatre awards by Guinness, in which a key objective reads: 'to link Guinness with innovation and creativity, the key qualities of Guinness advertising' (Guinness, 1997: 43). Profile work is also used defensively and on behalf not just of individual organizations but also of wider industry interests. A good example to hand is the 1986 campaign for the Chemical Industries Association. Entitled 'Chemicals are good for you' the case narrative begins in the following way:

> The chemical industry is one of Britain's most successful manufacturing sectors. [. . .] Its products supply every other industry and are essential to modern society. Yet public evaluation of the chemical industry is poor in terms of both familiarity and favourability. [. . .] Industry Year 1986 presented the ideal opportunity for chemical companies to win the goodwill of their local communities by a programme of events linked with the year's overall objectives. (Chemical Industries Association, 1987: 25)

Corporate identity and culture deals ultimately with employee motivation. The need for this kind of work may arise either out of structural changes which the organization is undergoing, such as mergers, take-overs, and new business development; or it may be linked to changes in work practices. An example of the first is the campaign prepared by public relations teams in the Grand Metropolitan hotels group and the Guinness drinks conglomerate when the two were merging to form Diageo. The campaign was aimed at managing the attitudes and behaviour of 85,000 employees all over the world by providing information about the proposed change, dealing with feelings of job insecurity, managing share price-sensitive information, and keeping the normal operations going under these special circumstances. A more straightforward example of cultural re-engineering is illustrated by one of the winning campaigns of 1990, 'Focus on the customer' in the context of 'dramatic restructuring' of the paints market:

> The only way ICI Paints can respond is to be better than them [competitors] at meeting customer needs. The broad objectives are: to bring about a service orientated culture [. . .], to ensure that employees understand and subscribe to the concept of 'internal customer' and to recognize that the quality of service that

reaches the customer begins with the quality of service that people inside the company give each other. (ICI Paints, 1990: 11)

Lobbying refers to efforts expended in the public and political arena in order to change or prevent changes in the law such as those regulating divorce or taxation or to influence government decisions about awarding a big contract. Although the cases mentioned so far have focused on the national level of decision-making, lobbying can also cut across the various levels of administration. For example, the operator of the port in Ramsgate embarked on a campaign in 1993 targeting local (Kent County Council), national (Westminster) and European (Brussels) levels of government, the first to seek planning permission for building an access road, and the remaining two to attract funding for the project.

The remaining two problem areas are elusive. *Public information or health campaigns* were represented by only six cases in the data collected: two dealing with health issues (first aid and breast cancer awareness); the remaining four dealing with matters of public importance, or to put it differently, matters about which the public should be told. Two of these are explained by the client organization's statutory obligation to communicate; the two remaining public information campaigns seem to have had a very strong public expectation attached to them as far as the appropriate dissemination of information was concerned. The common denominator in these campaigns was the public interest, where the 'public' was objectified as the population or citizenry.

The final category of professional problems identified, *presentation of specialist interests*, is even more tentative than health and public information, but important nevertheless. Although in numerical terms these specialist interest campaigns barely register in the institutional account of excellence (4 out of 111), they are important as an illustration of the uses to which public relations expertise can potentially be put (raising awareness of feng shui, or a forgotten breed of dogs).

If we accept that a profession's ability to capture problems is the mechanism for securing and extending its jurisdiction, and if we note that the institutional account presented through the winning case studies privileges product promotion and profile work (70 percent of all cases), it is reasonable to ask what consequences this professional positioning might have on the structure and content of professional expertise. The answer has already been offered by our discussion of the conceptual frame which, as we have seen, privileges an organizational perspective and concepts such as identity or reputation. On the other hand, the uniform nature of professional tools (with the same basic structure running through a whole range and complexity of tools) ensures that they are applicable to a range of practical needs, which on the face of it may seem very different as the above problem categories show.

Tools

This element of public relations expertise can be understood as a repository of information about professional tools. It contains basic descriptions of all the tools as well as more detailed information about their structure, about how to apply them, and about the effects they may produce. Tools also differ in their complexity and the types of outcomes they are meant to produce. Thus we have a group of tools used to produce artefacts and events, such as the press release, the pitch, the press conference, the photocall, corporate literature, speech writing. These may often be referred to as skills. Then there is a group of more complex tools, for example, issue management, investor relations, public affairs, media relations, internal communication, reputation management, etc. These tools are otherwise seen as public relations specialisms, recognizing the fact that they are larger structures, usually applied as programmes or campaigns. Finally, there is a smaller group of tools used specifically for analytical purposes. These tend to have less standardized, more descriptive names, for example: 'prioritizing stakeholder demands', 'reviewing internal tactics in issue management', 'what information do employees want?', 'assess your success', 'media will ask three questions', 'issue life cycle', and 'examine corporate behaviour'.

Except for the analytical tools which serve as ways of organizing information and illuminating problems, there is a strong common feature shared by public relations tools: they are understood and presented as a series of steps to be taken in providing a professional solution to a public relations problem. Their structure and application overlap in explanations given by the trainers: 'media interviews preparation: know your messages, research the journalist, anticipate difficult questions, think about responses in advance' (Training session, 28/7/98a). Occasionally, however, there may be additional information available specifically about their application. For example, some of the qualities which should be built into a tool such as an employee communication campaign are commitment from senior managers, honesty, and regularity of communication.

Searching for the common denominator, we can say that tools are not only individual steps, but actually a single sequence, which can be summarized as situation analysis, objective setting, developing a strategy, and assessment of the work carried out (evaluation). This structure operates both for simple tools, like press releases, and for complex large programmes, like reputation management:

> Creating news releases: planning, content, style, checking. (Training session, 4/8/98b)

> Managing reputation consists of: understanding your environment, players, constraints/resources; setting goals (research); implementation, evaluation (research). (Training session, 20/7/98a)

Beyond structure and application, the tools repository also contains information about the effects produced by the tools. The purposes to which corporate communication is put are: 'increase awareness; correct mis-impressions, project truths, establish links, create climate of opinion; increase new product acceptability; develop influence; enhance morale' (Training session, 28/7/98b).

Finally, public relations tools rely on what is known in marketing as segmentation, and they aim at pro-active management of the environment. Segmentation, more commonly known in public relations as 'targeting', is a technique of breaking audiences into a number of more tightly-defined groups relevant to the problem at hand in order to craft communication so that it takes account of the specific characteristics of these groups. A pro-active approach to environment is aimed primarily at landscaping the organization's environment in order to gain more control over the public relations problems it might face.

To see how this repository works, let us take one tool, issues management, and follow the different types of information available about it. First of all, the tool is conventionally identified:

> Issues management is something to have in your toolkit. (Training session, 3/8/98a)

and then defined more fully in training:

> Issue management is a disciplined business strategy to identify and understand external factors that influence an organization's relationship with stakeholders; identify sources and audience concerns of these factors; adjust communication and corporate behaviour to protect/enhance corporate reputation with these audiences. (Training session, 3/8/98a)

Although there is a sense of structure already present in this definition, a more explicit step-by-step explanation is also available:

> [Issue management] strategies: map the issues environment (understand the science); identify and prioritize publics; identify third parties, address internal processes and policies, prepare plan and timing, establish dialogue, communicate, monitor. (Training session, 3/8/98a)

Each of these steps is then broken down to another series of steps to be followed, producing, in effect, a very detailed manual. Additional information available to practitioners about issue management gives it an analytical framework for understanding the dynamics, or life cycle, of issues ('potential, emerging, current, crisis, dormant'). There are also points on applications, not obvious from the basic structure of the tool, but crucial to the effects produced:

> Tactics: meet majority of criticism, satisfy moderate campaigners, isolate extremists.

> Refocus the issue: challenge the emphasis, restate the problem, build new coalitions, help them to publicize their position, conduct research. (Training session, 3/8/98a)

Truths

In addition to professional knowledge encompassed in the problems and tools, public relations professionals are also guided in their practice by ‘truths which we hold to be self-evident’. These truths are about public relations work and its effects, about others and the world. As a category, they are therefore clearly connected to the picture of the world, and the conceptual frame; where they differ is in their form and complexity. Truths often sound like maxims; they are, in practitioners’ minds, so simple and so obvious as to be taken for granted. For example,

> Build goodwill before you need it. (Training session, 28/7/98b)
>
> Talk straight and simple. (Training session, 28/7/98b)
>
> Issues affect survival. (Training session, 3/8/98a)

Both the picture of the world and the conceptual frame incorporate elements of argument, reasoning, or abstract thinking; truths do not. They represent the level of knowledge which is least open to reasoning, discussion or manipulation; maxims can be seen as inobtrusive instruments of teaching or inculcation (cf. Bourdieu, 1992: 73–5 on the transmission of ‘practical mastery’).

Conclusions

This article addresses two main questions. The first, ‘What is public relations expertise?’, is posed at the beginning and answered through a detailed analysis of empirical ethnographic material. Public relations expertise is seen as constituted and transmitted through practice. It is a complex interactive structure organized through past experience and current exigencies which modifies itself through action, i.e. professional work and training.

The second question has so far been merely hinted at: ‘What are the consequences of adopting a particular theoretical and methodological perspective for our understanding of public relations?’ So far, research has been advanced from, and largely contained in, two different disciplinary corners of the academic world: management and media studies.

The first has drawn institutional support, at least initially, from American public relations university courses and been outspoken in allying research and teaching with the interests of the public relations profession. As an intellectual endeavour, this strand of research has been characterized by nervousness about its own identity, trying different theoretical approaches, while at the same time attempting an integrated theory under the auspices of the systems approach (see for example Botan and Hazelton, 1989; Grunig, 1992). The resulting engagement with public relations practice, dependent as it has been on survey research, self-reporting, and the managerial/professional agenda, has neither dealt well with dilemmas offered by concepts of *propaganda, dialogue* or the *public sphere*, nor has it produced extensive and convincing explanations of the actual practice.

Media studies has predominantly considered public relations as media sources, looking either for patterns and evidence of domination by powerful institutions and interests; or more broadly, focused on issues of access and participation (for a discussion see Davis, 2000). Although intellectually and methodologically coherent, this school has firmly fixed its gaze above the heads of individual practitioners, focusing instead on the meta level of sociological analysis and on the effects of public relations, rather than on the practice itself. Thus, public relations is understood primarily through the pursuit of its clients' interests.

A substantial role is played in contemporary public relations by the institution of consultancy, in itself often part of a large holding structure encompassing a range of communication practices such as advertising, marketing, and market research. This suggests the existence of an expertise which is distinctive yet flexible enough to be applicable across a wide field, replicable, routinized as schemes and available for hire – an outside agent who must, at least partly, interact with clients by re-interpreting their needs in ways malleable to professional expertise. It is precisely this relatively autonomous character of public relations that is proposed as a necessary addition to our understanding and analysis of the phenomenon.

Notes

1. A review of the extensive literature, as well as my own view of its relevance to current debates about the public relations profession, has been presented elsewhere (Pieczka and L'Etang, 2001).
2. All but the quotation below are taken from the trainers' own presentations. There were two sessions each day, each with a different trainer, indicated by the date and 'a' or 'b' respectively.
3. The 1989 set of summaries has not been recoverable and therefore has been excluded. The author believes that this gap is unlikely to be a serious limitation in view of the nature of the analysis the rest of the material has been subjected to.

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Magda Pieczka is a lecturer in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of Stirling and a member of the Stirling Media Research Institute. She is completing a PhD on the production of expertise and professionalism in British public relations practice. She is the co-author and editor with Jacquie L'Etang of *Critical Perspectives on Public Relations* (London, International Thompson, 1996, second revised edition forthcoming).
Address: Stirling Media Research Institute, Stirling University, Stirling, FK9 4LA, Scotland.
[email: magda.pieczka@stir.ac.uk]