Footprints in the sand: insights into the public relations profession in Queensland

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Abstract

This paper presents some early findings from an Australian study into understanding professionalisation in public relations. Existing discussions of professionalisation in the public relations literature have focused on a trait-based approach to the sociology of the professions. Another approach, suggested in this paper, is that professions emerge through shared meanings as communities of practice. This recent study of public relations practice in Queensland showed that while public relations professionals reported a number of traits that are hallmarks of professionalisation, much practice is technical rather than strategic. Another finding was that less than 4% of public relations professionals had a job title that included the words ‘public relations’ despite the fact that almost 90% were members of the PRIA and more than 50% had tertiary education in public relations. These findings contribute to the ongoing discussion about the role for education, and the professional association in the move to professionalise public relations and suggest opportunities for further research.

Key words: public relations, professionalisation, education

Introduction

The professionalisation of public relations continues to provide a focus of interest for academics and practitioners (Pieczka & L’Etang, 2001). Sociological frameworks that have been widely used for understanding professions,
professionalism and professionalisation in the public relations literature have focused on a much used troika—certification, ethics, and body of knowledge (education and scholarship) (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Pieczka & L’Etang, 2001).

While public relations is a relatively young profession in Australia, this troika forms a central focus for our industry and of the industry body. For example, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) was established in Australia in 1959 and its Code of Ethics guiding members have been an important role in professionalising the industry (Johnston & Zawawi, 2003). Tertiary education courses were first established in 1969 at Charles Sturt University and Queensland University of Technology (QUT) (Johnston & Zawawi, 2003), and now undergraduate and post-graduate degree programs are offered around the country. These courses contribute to these traditional notions of legitimising public relations as a profession through the education and scholarship they contribute to the field.

Another perspective emerging in the literature of the emergence of professions is that professions operate as shared meanings of communities of practice (Squires, 2001). Historical accounts of public relations suggest that the field is emerging as a profession according to commonly used definitions (Pieczka & L’Etang, 2001), there has been little work done in understanding what public relations professionals do in Australia. This can have implications for the emerging body of sociological work examining professions as communities of practice (Squires, 2001).

Through the communities of practice perspective, the work of professionals on a day to day basis shape and are shaped by the institution of the professions which have been the existing focus of study in public relations (Bartlett, Tywoniak, & Hatcher, 2007). Internationally, there have been some studies examining practices of senior practitioners in the United Kingdom (Gregory, 2004) and in the United States through the Annenberg GAP studies. However, there has been little work done on understanding the micro-level of how public relations professionals practice in Australia.

This paper presents the findings of a pilot study into the practice of public relations in Australia. This study of public relations practitioners in Queensland provides some initial insights—or a footprint—of the community of public relations practice. If one element of, the Queensland public relations industry was chosen as a site for the pilot study as professionalisation is the body of knowledge that has been served by QUT as one of the oldest public relations tertiary courses in the country, should be shaped by the body of knowledge shared from that university. A study into the Queensland public relations industry should therefore provide a rich site in which to examine the work of public relations professionals in Australia.
Professions, practice and public relations

Until the 1960’s, professions were characterised by the “traits that set professions apart from other groups in society accounted for their prominent role” (Pieczka & L’Etang 2001, p. 224). This led to professions being defined in terms of ideal or typical traits of those practicing the profession as a body of knowledge. This development and management of a specific body of knowledge is one way to achieve a division of labour in society and gain legitimacy of a profession (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001).

After the 1960’s, this trait approach of ‘what is a profession’ continued to evolve to be defined on the basis of its adherence to the list of professional traits as well as conforming to a specific body of complex skills and formal knowledge as a way to claim, attain or retain elite status (Pieczka & L’Etang, 2001). One implication was that professions sought to gain a legal monopoly on the provision of certain services justified by the argument that the profession provided a form of public service, and a fiduciary relationship with clients founded on a code of ethics (Elliott, 1972; Wilensky, 1964). This early view led to conceiving professionalisation as the socio-economic project of occupational groups seeking greater autonomy, status, and power in society (Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977).

These perspectives focus on profession as a type of desired or goal state to which groups of practitioners might aspire in order to gain legitimacy and status. But another emerging body of sociological work on professions suggests that professions also emerge from the shared understanding about a type of work that emerge through communities of practice (Squires, 2001).

One of the central claims of the communities of practice argument is that such communities of practice provide an efficient device to manage knowledge because their members share a common background of experience and technical/professional know-how which enables them to make sense of the largely tacit knowledge being exchanged (Tywonik, 2007). In other words, communities of practice are involved in the production, re-production and generation of knowledge based on taken-for-granted conventions about professional roles, work processes and methods. According to Squires (2001), professions as sets of practices can be defined in terms of specific activities and occupations which aim to achieve defined outcomes, such as treating a patient by using identifiable tools and artefacts; and the mastery of knowledge that enables problem-solving and adaptation to contingencies. This perspective has three implications. First, that professionals are instrumental “in the sense that they exist in order to have some kind of effect or impact on the world” (Squires 2001, p. 475). Second, they are contingent in that carrying out the work of that professional draws on judgement rather than the simple application of a rule (Squires, 2001). Finally they are procedural, not in the sense that professional practices involve the careful application of a well-defined process, but in the sense that professionals
mobilise resources of experience and know-how (Ryle, 1949) to solve contingent problems.

The three concepts of knowledge, autonomy and responsibility central to a traditional notion of professionalism, are often seen as interrelated. This is because professionals face complex and unpredictable situations that they need a specialized body of knowledge. If they are to apply that knowledge, it is argued that they need the autonomy to make their own judgements. Given that they have autonomy, it is essential that they act with responsibility—collectively they need to develop appropriate professional values (Furlong, Barton, Miles, & Whitty 2000, p. 5)

These perspectives suggest that rather than viewing public relations professionalisation as an institution or goal state, instead a profession is seen as a body of knowledge. Individuals then apply that shared knowledge to deal with complex problems in contingent situations. Given that public relations activities are practiced by those considering themselves members of the public relations fraternity, as well as marketers, lawyers, management consultants, communicators and others, these developments in the sociology of professions suggest that there is a need to consider public relations as a profession through a new theoretical lens. Therefore, there is a need for a greater understanding of the relationship between the public relations profession as it is practiced and the professionalism of public relations as it is presently conceived.

Methodology

In order to begin such an investigation, this pilot study undertook to investigate what it is that people who are employed to practice public relations do in their day-to-day work. This raises a number of questions which formed the focus of this pilot study. The first three sought to understand the nature of the people and practices as they are today. The final question was open-ended and sought to gain insights for developing the research further. The central questions asked were:

- What is the educational background and professional experience of those practicing the profession of public relations?
- What is the reporting role of public relations professionals in organisations?
- What are the practices conducted by public relations professionals?
- As a public relations practitioner, what are your concerns for the future?
Data collection
The study used an online survey that employed both multiple-option and open-ended questions. The questions covered demographics, position title, role of public relations in the management structure and type of public relations work conducted. Open-ended questions focused on gathering insights on issues for the future for public relations professionals in Queensland.

The survey was made available to the membership of the PRIA (Qld) and the SBC (Qld). The survey was online for a period of three weeks in December 2006.

Findings
A total of 355 public relations and communications practitioners in Queensland constituted the sample. The response rate to the survey was 30% (n=79). Of the respondents, 87% nominated PRIA membership and 20% SBC membership (multiple responses allowed). The sample consisted of 70% (n=55) female and 30% (n=24) male participants.

Education and industry experience
More than 50% (n=42) held undergraduate degrees while more than 30% (n=25) reported holding a graduate degree. Respondents were asked the area of degree specialisation. This allowed respondents to nominate a number of areas in which they felt they had formal education. The most frequently reported degree area was public relations (49.4%), closely followed by communication (41.8%). Around 21% of respondents nominated journalism as their area of specialisation, while almost 18% nominated marketing. Advertising (5.1%) and integrated marketing communication (5.1%) were other areas nominated by respondents.

The largest majority of respondents in this study had been working in the industry for more than 10 years. Just over 24% reported being in the industry for 10–15 years; 10% for 15–20 years; and 24% for more than 20 years.

Reporting arrangements
Almost 30% worked in consultancy while 70% held in-house positions. Respondents were asked to nominate their position title in relation to communication, public relations, public affairs, marketing communication, corporate communication, reputation, relationship, event management, or if they were sole practitioner or other.

As illustrated in Table 1 below, the most frequently reported job title included communication manager/officer, followed by marketing communications (15.9%). Public relations and public affairs titles were nominated by only 4.3% (n=3) for each title name. More than 51% reported did not identify with the
titles offered in the questionnaire. An analysis of the open-ended responses received indicated that key words used in job titles included director, strategic, and corporate.

**TABLE 1: Job titles of Queensland public relations professionals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job title key word</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Communication</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole practitioner</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Affairs</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Relations</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey asked participants to indicate the reporting relationship for public relations practice in their organisations. This study found that almost 50% of the respondents said that the public relations professional reported directly to the CEO. Of the remaining 50% of professionals, 14.5% reported to marketing, 3% to human resources and the remainder to other positions including the board, general managers and clients.

**Public relations in practice**

In order to understand the nature of the practices that public relations professionals were involved in, respondents were asked to choose five options to best categorise the type of work tasks they performed. The results of this question are presented below in Table 2. Writing and editing (70%) represented the most frequently nominated task, followed by marketing communication (56.5%) and media relations (49.3%). The tasks that could be classified as “strategic” were less frequently performed: strategic planning (35%), crisis and management issues (26%), counsel to management (19%), research (13%) and evaluation (6%). Other practice contexts also nominated were employee communication (29%), relationship management (28%), reputation management (19%), community consultation (20%) and investor and financial relations (3%).
TABLE 2: Type of work performed by Queensland public relations practitioners

These findings suggest that while there is considerable rhetoric around public relations being seen as a strategic role, the greatest majority of work conducted as reported in this study, is related to writing and editing, marketing communication and media relations. In reflecting on the communities of practice argument presented in the literature review, the findings presented in this table suggest that much of the public relations work is related to carrying out communication tasks rather than in planning and counsel.

Issues for the future

The results presented so far have focused on the actual practices in which public relations practitioners in Queensland engage. This section reports the concerns that these practitioners have for the future. In order to understand professionals’ concerns for the future, the respondents for this survey were asked: What issues keep you up at night? The findings of the study suggest that the key concerns were linked to resources, recognition and decision making.
Lack of resources was one of the key areas of concern for a number of respondents. The nature of the resources referred to by respondents was wide ranging and included funding and the ability to recruit qualified people. Time was also one of the resource issues, not the least of which was keeping work and life in balance. For others, it was pressure both at work and with work restricting issues.

Recognition of the nature of public relations work was another area that was raised by participants, and one which had a number of facets. One of the clearest concerns remains a lack of understanding by clients and management of what public relations practitioners do. Evidence of the lack of recognition of the public relations role was reported by respondents in their day-to-day work in terms of demands for regular fire fighting, demands for continuous positive publicity, restrictive organisational practices and excessive expectations related to outputs.

In addition, concerns were raised by respondents about the role they played in organisational decision making. This was reported by respondents as a lack of consultation in the decision making process by management. This suggests that while there may be a community of practice shared by public relations practitioners, the role of public relations is not necessarily seen as part of the community of practice of organisational management and decision making.

Discussion

This study has provided a ‘footprint’ of the public relations profession in Queensland seen through the eyes of PRIA and SBC members. The pilot study has provided some insights into those in the industry and the practices of public relations. Understanding these dimensions can potentially provide fruitful insights into the evolution of public relations as a profession. From a sociological perspective, the discussion presented at the beginning of this paper of the relationship between the public relations profession as a desired goal, and the contingent and responsive profession as a community of practice, may be informed by such insights.

In some areas, the findings of this study reflect other studies into public relations. For example, a large majority of respondents in this study were female, which corresponds with other studies (Toth, 2001). Such studies have indicated the implications of this for the status of the field (Toth, 1987). Practitioner concerns in this study related to lack of recognition of the role of public relations appear aligned with such a perspective.

However, at the same time, the reporting structures identified in this study suggest that public relations is recognised as an important and strategic business function. In this study, it was found that 50% of respondents were in roles that reported to the CEO and only 15% to marketing. While this study used public relations practitioners from a wide range of organisations, this result
Footprints in the sand

is favourable as compared to international studies from the UK and the USA which have examined similar phenomena. In the GAP IV study conducted by USC Annenberg public relations research centre in 2005 which surveyed public relations managers in Fortune 500 companies, 64% reported to CEO and 25% to Marketing (USC Annenberg, 2005). In the Leeds Metropolitan study of the UK which also drew on leading corporations, likewise 64% reported to the CEO (Gregory, 2004).

However, there also appears to be a disconnect between these findings about the reporting relationships of the public relations role and the actual practices which dominate public relations practitioners’ time. This study showed that while 15% of the respondents reported to marketing, marketing communication work accounted for 56.5% of the reported work carried out (See Table 1 above). This association is also reflected in the fact that reporting to and dealing with the CEO on a regular basis is a dominant relationship, yet ‘technical’ work accounts for the greatest proportion of activity. These findings suggest there is an opportunity for more in-depth research to understand the nature and significance of these findings in this pilot study.

Another finding which we suggest warrants further exploration is that while a large majority of respondents held degrees in public relations and were members of the PRIA, very few held positions in which the term public relations featured in their title. Communication was a more frequently used term for the function. However, it is also interesting to note the prominence of the term director and manager in the names proffered by respondents. This suggests an interesting line of enquiry for future research if recognition of public relations at a practice level is interrelated to the legitimacy of public relations as a profession at a societal level as emerging sociological scholarship suggests (Squires, 2001).

Conclusion and opportunities for further research

This pilot study sought to capture a snapshot of the practices conducted by those who self-identified themselves as public relations practitioners. This was done through capturing data related to personal data related to gender, experience, educational qualifications, and future expectations, and through data related to the nature of the public relations practice conducted by those practitioners. The findings in this pilot study suggest that while those carrying out public relations work have educational, professional and organisational backing that reflect the hallmarks of the traditional notions of profession, much public relations work is practiced as a technical function. This raises many opportunities for expanding the existing focus of research into understanding public relations as a profession. This paper suggests that exploring public relations as a community of practice may offer a fruitful area for study which the findings of this study have further illuminated.
Such a perspective may be useful for understanding public relations as a truly strategic function, in that it is at the frontier of understanding organisational environments and developing relationships with stakeholders that can impact an organisation, as reflected in definitions of public relations (Cutlip et al., 2006). Such a desired charter for public relations as a profession may actually need the contingent and flexible characteristics of a profession as a community of practice, rather than a set of rules arising from formulaic application of professional practices to situation as would be required in professions such as accounting or law. As such, further research that draws on emerging sociological paradigms may be particularly useful for public relations.

References


