Remembering the Public in
Public Relations Research:
From Theoretical to
Operational Symmetry

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In an attempt to reconcile public relations research with a range of critical concerns, J. Grunig and colleagues have proposed a two-way symmetrical model that reformulates public relations as a more inclusive, balanced, and ethical practice. A contradiction exists, however, between two-way symmetrical theory and the asymmetrical research agenda it perpetuates: an agenda that continues to subsidize commercial and state communications at the expense of other segments of the population. To achieve real inclusion and balance in public relations, research must begin to address the public communications needs and constraints of previously excluded segments of the population.

Public relations is a prominent feature of the modern communications landscape. In the course of a century, it has been transformed from a largely intuitive and informal practice to a $10 billion industry in North America alone, employing hundreds of thousands of practitioners, researchers, and educators (Awad, 1985; Kendall, 1984; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988). Few would dispute the claim that it has become “a potent force in society” (Toth, 1992).

Despite the pervasive influence of public relations, very little effort has gone into understanding its role in, and effects on, contemporary society. While a long-standing mission of justification and defense exists among practitioners—

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constituting a well-established apologetic tradition—there has been inadequate academic effort to explore the wider social implications of public relations activity.

This is not to imply that the academic community has ignored public relations. The practice of public relations, either directly or indirectly, has been the object of considerable academic research for over half a century. This research, however, primarily has been instrumental in nature. Researchers have responded to the questions and problems of practitioners, accumulating a large body of literature and expertise, yet showing little interest in the broader social implications of their research.

The time for self-reflection in public relations research is long overdue. What are the premises shaping public relations research? Who has benefited from this research? And how can the public relations research agenda be reconciled with participatory, representative, and inclusive theories of public discourse?

This article is an initial effort to address these questions through reflection on various streams of public relations research. While critical in nature, this analysis does not constitute a condemnation of the practice of public relations. In fact, it concludes by positing a potentially valuable role for the public relations practitioner in contemporary society. What this article seeks to expose, however, is the manner in which public relations research to date has privileged—or subsidized—certain segments of the population in their public communications capabilities and marginalized others to the periphery of public discourse.

ACADEMIC VERSUS PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

A historical analysis of public relations research first must distinguish between academic and practitioner research. This distinction is necessary because a strong tradition of applied research has developed within the practice, and it explicitly is wed to the self-interests of its sponsoring clients. In contrast, academic research, at least in principle, is publicly sponsored and is assumed to serve the broadest public interest.

In practice, however, the distinction between practitioner and academic research is not easily discerned. The methodologies increasingly used by public relations practitioners, for instance, originated within various social and behavioral science disciplines. The migration of these methodologies into public relations is well illustrated in John Marston's 1963 "RACE" model of public relations, incorporating research, action, communication, and evaluation into public relations practice (see Files, 1982, for an excellent summary). Such sophisticated, problem-solving approaches to public relations, emphasizing research and evaluation as key elements in the formulation of effective communication strategies, are now staples of public relations textbooks, professional journals, and practice.
Further blurring the distinction between the two bodies of research, a great deal of academic research also has been closely wed to the interests of specific clients. This theme will be developed in subsequent sections. Note, however, that this trend makes a great deal of academic research indistinguishable in content from the applied research of practitioners.

Despite the blurred line between academic and practitioner research, this article primarily is concerned with the former. Although it is presumed that privately commissioned public relations research will serve the self-interests of specific clients, this presumption is highly problematic when it underlies publicly supported research. It is, therefore, the relationship between academic research and the wider public interest that is explored in this article.

INSTUMENTAL VERSUS CRITICAL RESEARCH

Within the academic tradition, a further distinction also must be made between instrumental and critical research. Instrumental research refers to pragmatic research conducted under the premise that theories are instruments that function as guides to practice, with their validity determined by the efficacy of those practices. Instrumental public relations research, therefore, is concerned with the micro-level questions and techniques: the "how-to" of public relations. In contrast, critical research is concerned with theorizing, or critiquing, the broader social, political, and economic implications of public relations practices. It is concerned with the macro-level effects of public relations in contemporary society.

Any review of the literature demonstrates that, to date, public relations research has been overwhelmingly instrumental.

Instrumental Research

Instrumental research in public relations can be traced through a wide range of disciplines, representing diverse theoretical and methodological traditions. Underlying most instrumental public relations research, however, are a number of common premises that have shaped it across disciplinary boundaries.

One of the fundamental premises of this research is the idea that public relations is essentially a one-way process of communication: communication from an organization to a public. Historically, this view of public relations fits neatly into Shannon and Weaver's classic Mathematical Theory of Communication (1949) and other transmission models of communication. In 1955, Edward Bernays, one of the father figures of the practice, explicitly articulated this premise in the title of a public relations book he edited, The Engineering of Consent. So influential was Bernays's work upon successive generations of research that Olasky's (1984) public relations
retrospective identifies this persuasive—or in Bernays’s own words “manipulative”—premise as “Bernays’s paradigm.”

A closely related set of premises that buttresses the one above is identified by J. Grunig (1989) as a worldview in which “the organization knows best,” in which “the public would benefit from cooperating with the organization,” and in which the public would willingly cooperate if only they “had the ‘big picture’ or understood the organization” (p. 32). In short, while seldom articulated as such, public relations was understood as a patronizing activity through which organizational wisdom legitimately shaped public thoughts, values, and behaviors.

Implicit in both premises, as evidenced by the history of public relations research, is yet a more fundamental premise that public relations is primarily a practice for organizations operating in the market place. In other words, public relations is primarily an instrument of commerce. According to this premise, the best interests of the market, and hence of society at large, can be realized only if businesses pursue their self-interests by engaging channels of mass communication effectively and persuasively. This economic premise has had an overarching influence on instrumental research in the field. In keeping with the generally economistic world view of the twentieth century, this instrumental research has assumed the public to be primarily consumers and the public sphere to be primarily a marketplace.

Research conducted under this premise thus has conceptualized public relations as a commercial management function—a means of influencing consumer values and behavior, of cultivating markets, of corporate image control, and of corporate issue management. This research has drawn from social and behavioral theories of organization and management, of persuasion and rhetoric, of attitude and behavior change, of advertising and media effects, of public opinion formation, issue cycles, and other areas.

Though this economic premise has dominated public relations research, one subordinate premise also is worth noting. If public relations primarily is an instrument of commerce, it secondarily is an instrument of state. Research into state-sponsored public relations dates back at least as long as its commercial counterpart and draws on many of the same theoretical traditions. Its original impulse, however, came from the propaganda research inspired and driven by the two World Wars. Currently, it also retains a slightly different orientation from the business tradition, with a focus on partisan political campaigns, public information campaigns, public education, and more recent endeavors like risk communication. The premise underlying this research tradition is, in turn, that members of the public are political spectators—passive recipients of state-sponsored public relations campaigns.

Together, the concerns of commerce and state have established the boundaries of most instrumental research in public relations. And the instrumental know-how generated over decades of such research represents a massive subsidy that has
privileged these segments of the population in their public communications capabilities. Even though it can be argued that other segments of the population—citizens, public interest groups, community associations, social movements, and so forth—are free to partake of this instrumental know-how in the pursuit of their own interests, it cannot be ignored that few segments of the population, apart from commercial and state entities, have the professional experience or material resources to do so. Nor do some of these groups wish to engage in manipulative and patronizing forms of public relations, which in principle may run counter to their own social values and commitments.

Critical Research

Critical research in public relations has received only a fraction of the support that instrumental research has, and most of this has been comparatively recently. Yet this research—again representing a range of disciplinary perspectives—raises important questions and concerns about the broader social, political, and economic implications of the practice.

For instance, critical scholars of rhetoric argue in favor of a dialectic process—dialogue, debate, and the clash of ideas—as a means for forging consensus and resolving conflict among disparate groups. But they frequently identify public relations practitioners as large-scale polluters of the rhetorical environment, practicing "irresponsible and empty communication" and diminishing overall confidence in, and opportunities for, dialectical processes in society (Heath, 1992a, p. 33). Rhetorical critics also point to the significantly privileged position of corporate practitioners because of their access to great resources, their concentrated control of information, and the one-way nature of much of their communication (Cheney & Dionisopoulou, 1989). Because of this privileged position, corporate practitioners often are called to account for losing sight of broader public interests as they attempt to influence public perceptions, values, and policies according to narrowly defined corporate self-interests (Heath, 1992a, 1992b).

Another critique arises from research into public relations ethics. This critique primarily is concerned with the widespread expression of ethical relativism—the notion that universal principles, values, or standards of human action do not exist—within the practice of public relations (Pearson, 1989a). The problem with relativist positions in public relations, as Pearson argued, is that they "lead to a cynical kind of activism where self-interest (or client interest) is the standard for action" (1989b, p. 115). Describing the ethical vacuum within which many public relations practitioners operate, Olasky (1985) writes that "their thinking, when it comes to public relations practice, is almost invariably manipulative; that is what they believe professional public relations to be all about", (pp. 42, 43). As he recounts from his study of 50 middle- and upper-level practitioners:
One upper-level manager asked, “Does the word ‘lie’ actually mean anything anymore? In one sense, everyone lies, but in another sense, no one does, because no one knows what’s true—it’s whatever makes you look good. . . .” Another executive argued that “there is no such thing as truth. You judge actions depending on whether they’re done by someone above you or someone below you. There’s no right or wrong. If someone above did something, it’s not to be judged in the same way as stuff done by someone below. And don’t give me any of that bull about principles. The job of a public relations professional is to make sure the plan works.” . . . “To talk of lies is to live in the past,” [another] manager said. “I doubt if the word will even be in our everyday vocabularies in a couple of decades. There are no lies anymore, just interests waiting to be served.” (pp. 43–44)

Another critical concern arises from a political economy perspective: Access to information represents genuine costs. Policy actors, therefore, supply information subsidies to news organizations and other institutions “to increase the consumption of persuasive messages by reducing their cost” (Gandy, 1992, p. 142). The problem, however, is that “success in providing information subsidies to one’s chosen targets is closely tied to the resources available to the subsidy giver” (Gandy, 1980, p. 106). Therefore, as Gandy (1992) explains,

Although all policy actors may engage in public relations, not all actors have the resources with which to ensure the success of their efforts. Public policy may be considered a game where the outcome is far from certain . . . but one is less at risk in wagering on the outcome when the combatants differ greatly in their resource endowments. Although public relations resources may occasionally be brought to bear in a debate on behalf of the interests of the citizen/consumer . . . corporate and government bureaucracies are the primary clients and beneficiaries. (p. 135)

Information subsidies thus reinforce the power and perspectives of dominant interests within society, giving these powerful interests a disproportionate ability to shape public policy and “structure realities for millions of people” (Turow, 1989, p. 212).

Yet another critique of public relations derives from the concerns of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Robert Park, and other Chicago School theorists concerned with the condition of community in an era of mass communication. A recent articulation of these concerns comes from Kruckenberg and Starck (1988), who caution against using persuasive mass communication techniques to pursue vested interests and manage conflict without paying attention to wider community interests or to the underlying causes of conflict. Kruckenberg and Starck assert the need for an alternative approach to public relations, one that “stimulates and activates attempts to restore and maintain a sense of community” (p. 26). This would require abandoning transmission models rooted in persuasion and advocacy and adopting
more dialogical models “based on social involvement and participation” (p. 63). They argue that:

those who take public relations seriously, professionals as well as scholars, should not view public relations as a means of “us”—communication specialists—simply doing something to “them”—targeted publics. Instead, those responsible should approach communication as a complex, multflow process having the potential to help create a sense of community. (p. xiii)

Within this holistic framework, Kruckenberg and Starck argue that public relations practitioners could best serve the interests of the part (their client organization) by serving the interests of the whole (the community).

RECONCILING PRACTICE WITH CRITIQUE

How can public relations practice be reconciled with the critical concerns discussed above? Elements of a more inclusive, ethical, and community-enhancing approach to public relations are beginning to coalesce around the concept of symmetrical communication.

The concept of symmetrical communication can be traced to a variety of sources, dating back to Plato’s ancient notion of dialogue. More recent sources include works on coorientation by Newcomb (1953), Carter (1965), Chaffee and McLeod (1968); Thayer’s (1968) systems theories distinguishing synchronic and diachronic communication; interpersonal theories distinguishing asymmetrical and symmetrical communication (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967); Ehling’s (1984, 1985) theories contrasting message dissemination and message exchange; Ackerman’s (1980) liberal political-communications theories of neutral dialogue; and Habermas’ (1970, 1984) theories of ideal communication and dialogical rationality.

Application of the concept of symmetry to public relations has been developed most fully by J. Grunig, together with a number of colleagues and students. In 1984, J. Grunig and Hunt published Managing Public Relations, a seminal work that distinguished four models in the history of public relations. J. Grunig and Hunt claimed that the first model, originating in the mid-19th century, could be seen in the rise of press agents such as P. T. Barnum, who specialized in attracting the attention of the press and public through often sensational techniques. This model was identified accordingly as the press agentry or publicity model of public relations. A second model of public relations emerged at the beginning of the 20th century when, in response to muckraking journalism and fermenting public distrust, large corporations and government agencies began to hire their own journalists to
distribute press handouts explaining their actions. This public information model, typified by the practice of Ivy Lee, one of its founding fathers, was based on the dissemination to the press and public of supposedly truthful, if not highly selective, information. Both of these models employed one-way communication in the practice of public relations.

J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) asserted that another model began to emerge shortly afterward, incorporating the methods and insights of the behavioral and social sciences into the practice. The introduction of a research-based approach meant that organizations were seeking to better understand the publics to which they were communicating. Communication thus was two-way, in that information not only was being disseminated from the organization, but also was being collected by the organization in the form of research on the habits, attitudes, and values of various publics. This model, exemplified in the practice and writings of Edward Bernays, was called the two-way asymmetrical model. Its purpose, however, remained essentially persuasive or manipulative.

The fourth model identified by J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) is the two-way symmetrical model, which is only now beginning to emerge. In this model, organizations employ two-way, balanced communications such as conflict resolution strategies, bargaining, and negotiating to facilitate the mutual understanding and adaptation of the organization and the public. In the two-way symmetrical model, the organization and various publics engage in dialogue for the purpose of mutual understanding and change.

In contrast to the manipulative premises of each of the asymmetrical models, J. Grunig (1989) suggested that an alternative set of premises underlie the two-way symmetrical model. These premises incorporate concepts of holism, interdependence, equality, responsibility, and understanding (pp. 38–39). J. Grunig's self-professed hope is that public relations will integrate these premises "in a way that will make it a highly valued and effective force for resolving social conflict and improving the societies in which we live" (p. 41).

Formulation of the two-way symmetrical model prompted a flurry of research aimed at testing its prescriptive value, both for organizations and communities. Much of this research was summarized by J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992). They concluded that research to date provides evidence that the two-way symmetrical model makes organizations more effective. Two types of research have been done: on the ethics of public relations and on the effectiveness of the models in achieving public relations objectives. Essentially, this research shows that the two-way symmetrical model is the most ethical approach to public relations and that ethical public relations also is the model most effective in meeting organizational goals. (p. 308)

Although they found the research "sobering" in so much as organizations still predominantly practice the manipulative models, they state that it also was encouraging to find that many organizations do practice the symmetrical model and that
“most practitioners would like to practice it if they had the knowledge necessary to do so and conditions in their organizations were favorable” (p. 307). These conclusions were supported in a 1995 follow-up study by Dozier, L. Grunig, and J. Grunig, with the qualification that several organizations not effectively practicing the two-way symmetrical communication at the time of earlier studies “had made tremendous strides” toward practicing it by the time of the follow-up study (p. ix).

FROM THEORETICAL TO OPERATIONAL SYMMETRY

By reformulating public relations as an ethical and effective force for resolving conflict and enhancing community, J. Grunig and his colleagues have provided a new theoretical framework within which public relations research can be reshaped and redirected. And the new insights provided by the symmetrical model are changing the research agenda—as can be seen by even a cursory examination of the public relations literature since its formulation. In the process, moreover, old premises of public relations research increasingly are being identified and challenged.

Two fundamental premises, however, remain largely unchallenged—even by those conducting research within the two-way symmetrical framework. These are the economic and political premises noted earlier in this article: that public relations is primarily an instrument of commerce, and secondarily an instrument of state. Both of these premises continue to relegate citizens and public interest groups to the periphery of public relations research.

It is here that an internal contradiction between J. Grunig’s theory and the research agenda it has spawned becomes apparent. Although J. Grunig (1989) views the political system as “a mechanism for open competition among interest or issue groups,” and looks to “citizen groups to champion interests of ordinary people against unresponsive government and corporate structures” (p. 39), the research agenda that he and his colleagues have followed thus far has focused almost exclusively on corporate and state communicative practices, and not on the communicative needs, constraints, or practices of citizen groups themselves. Therefore, this research agenda is not empowering citizens and communities, for it does not equip them with the skills and resources to enter into public discourse on their own terms. Rather, it continues to furnish instrumental insights (albeit more ethical and responsible ones) only to highly resource-endowed organizations. It continues to privilege, or subsidize, commercial and state entities in their public communications capabilities. Two-way symmetrical theory is being applied within an asymmetrical research agenda.

This asymmetry, perhaps unintentional and unconscious, becomes especially apparent in statements such as the following by J. Grunig (1993), which reflects the current research agenda:
Active publics are important targets for public relations programs because they are most likely to be aware of and concerned with what the organization is doing. In addition, if an organization does not communicate with active publics and attempt to manage conflict, those publics can become activist groups that can limit the ability of an organization to accomplish its goals—either directly through protest, boycott, or strike, or indirectly through government regulation. (p. 166)

A research agenda that truly looks to citizen groups to champion the "interests of ordinary people against unresponsive government and corporate structures" should have as its fundamental objective the empowerment of those "ordinary people"—not the further empowerment of those resource-rich organizations. An approach reflecting this alternative research agenda surely would have phrased the preceding statement with a very different emphasis. Using almost identical wording, for instance, it might have asserted that:

Active publics are important initiators of (rather than targets for) public relations programs because they are most likely to be aware of and concerned with what organizations are doing. In addition, if citizen groups do not communicate with organizations and attempt to manage conflict, those organizations can limit the ability of citizens to create the kind of communities in which they would like to live.

The differences between the former phrasing and the alternative phrasing are not trivial. They draw attention to the essential bias of the current research agenda—a commercial and state bias carried over, perhaps unwittingly, from the tradition of public relations research that it attempts to transform. The actual research carried out under this agenda has reflected this bias. Almost the entire body of research conducted within the two-way symmetrical framework has focused on commercial and state-agency case studies (e.g., Buffington, 1988; Childers, 1989; Cupp, 1985; Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; Fabiszak, 1985; Grunig, 1984; Guadino, Fritch, & Haynes, 1989; Kelly, 1989; Lauzen, 1986; Maymi, 1987; McMillan, 1987; Nelson, 1986; Ossareh, 1987; Pollack, 1984, 1986; Reagan, Anderson, Sumner, & Hill, 1989; Wetherell, 1989). Even those studies that have focused on "activism" have done so not from the perspective of the activist publics, but from the perspective of how organizations respond to public activism (see L. Grunig, 1992, for a summary of research on organizational response to public activism).

The asymmetry of the current research agenda is unfortunate, for the two-way symmetrical model contains valuable insights and prescriptions and is undoubtedly an ethical and responsible step forward. But by failing to redress the imbalance of privilege in public relations research, researchers merely reinforce charges from critics, who argue that public relations should be condemned precisely because of its bias toward big business and big government.
In an age of "teledemocracy," when all segments of the population "need help coping with the mass media" (Caspi, 1989, p. 217) and participating in public discourse and policy-making, symmetrical and ethical public relations skills will have an important role to play in facilitating more inclusive public discourse. As Shoemaker (1989) asserted:

Public relations efforts may be the only realistic strategy for a group to get media coverage and hence communicate with the mass audience. … public relations efforts on behalf of interest groups can actually have long-term prosocial consequences by providing a socially acceptable forum for the discussion and introduction of new ideas. (p. 215)

But it is not enough, as the current research agenda suggests, for already privileged organizations to adopt more symmetrical approaches to public relations. Symmetry assumes that all segments of the population have the communications skills and resources to represent themselves in public discourse.

Public communication skills and resources must be extended to all segments of society if communicative symmetry is to be realized. This is especially true of those segments that historically have been excluded from public discourse. If this is to happen, the theory of symmetrical public relations must be translated into a symmetrical research agenda. It could even be argued, from an affirmative action perspective, that this research agenda should pay disproportionate attention to the communicative needs of the resource-poor segments of the population who have been deprived of the benefits of instrumental public relations research to date.

How can citizen groups become more effective in their efforts to champion the interests of ordinary people? What types of effective communication practices are within reach of the resource-poor segments of society? How can the communicative skills and resources of these groups be augmented so that they effectively can enter into the discourses that shape society and public policy? What are the barriers that prevent these segments of society from entering into these discourses, and how can they be overcome? These are the questions that also must be incorporated into a symmetrical research agenda.

For instance, consider applying the theory of symmetrical public relations to forest management discourse in the Pacific Northwest—a highly contentious discourse that has been very prominent in the mass media in the past decade. Within this discourse, citizens with diverse concerns about the continued clearcutting of these forests often have resorted to extreme and confrontational media stunts and protests as a means of gaining public attention for their concerns. These tactics, of course, do not fit the two-way symmetrical model any more than the often manipulative public relations practices of the industry they are protesting against. If these tactics are to be reformed into more symmetrical approaches, however, it will be necessary to understand why they are used in the first place. Several
interconnected explanations of these practices are worth exploring and might themselves constitute groundwork hypotheses for a more symmetrical research agenda.

First, many citizens never have had the opportunity to learn how media organizations operate internally and how they can most effectively be accessed and engaged. Our society still appears to be largely media illiterate—at least when it comes to media-relations skills. Thus, even sympathetic journalists frequently complain that many citizens simply do not know how to provide them with story material they can use within the organizational constraints under which they operate. How can media literacy and media-relations competency within the population be evaluated, fostered, and promoted? These are questions for a more symmetrical research agenda.

Second, even citizens with adequate media-relations skills and insights do not necessarily have the resources to apply them effectively. Media-relations activity can be expensive and time-consuming. It represents only a marginal cost for private industry and state agencies, but it represents a primary cost for citizens and citizen-based interest groups. In this context, protests and publicity stunts often may represent the only cost-effective way for many citizens and interest groups to gain media coverage and public attention at all. What kinds of cost-effective symmetrical public relations opportunities and strategies exist for resource-poor segments of the population trying to engage the media and enter into public discourse? How can these segments of the population learn about these opportunities and strategies? Again, these are questions for a more symmetrical research agenda.

Finally, many citizens simply may have learned that in our highly adversarial western culture, they generally will be ignored by the media—and by their own political institutions—unless and until they are extreme and confrontational. This awareness, combined with the frustration and anger bred by disenfranchisement and disempowerment, is undoubtedly a powerful force behind extremism and confrontation in public discourse. How can journalists, media organizations, and other forums for public and political representation become more responsive to expressions of interest and concern by common citizens? How can the adversarial values upon which these institutions have been founded be transformed into the ideals of holism, interdependence, equality, responsibility, and understanding that are the premises of symmetrical public relations? Even more broadly, how can common citizens more fully be enfranchised and empowered within contemporary civil society? These are fundamental questions that also must be addressed if public relations is to move beyond its historical biases toward commercial and state communications.

To pursue such a research agenda, public relations scholars will need to venture outside the traditional boundaries of their research. A few fertile areas of interdisciplinary collaboration illustrate the possibilities:
Educational scholars already are formulating models for assessing and fostering media literacy within public primary and secondary schools, colleges, universities, and other venues for adult education. But these efforts have focused primarily on developing media-interpretation skills (e.g., Geretschläger, 1987; Hartley, 1982; Silverblatt, 1995). There is also a need, however, to focus on the kinds of media-relations skills and communicative competency that must characterize an active citizenry—areas that have received little attention to date. Scholars of symmetrical public relations could get in on the ground level of this work and make valuable contributions by applying the insights and objectives of symmetrical communication theory to the communicative needs of citizens.

Journalism scholars also are beginning to explore and experiment with more inclusive and participatory models of media performance and mass-mediated public deliberation. Civic journalism, or public journalism, are examples of such models, and they are gaining enthusiastic support among many journalists disillusioned with traditional media practices (e.g., Austin, 1994; Rosen, 1991; Rosen & Merritt, 1994). But these models thus far have been limited by a largely mediocentric perspective. Public relations scholars could make valuable contributions here too by exploring how symmetrical approaches to public relations could dovetail into these innovative journalistic models—again with special attention to the needs of resource-poor segments of the population.

Political scientists and conflict resolution scholars also are theorizing and experimenting with new forums for public consultation and new approaches to multi-stakeholder dialogue (e.g., Bush & Folger, 1994; Crowfoot & Wondolleck, 1990; Folger & Jones, 1994). Again, the lens of symmetrical public relations could provide new perspectives and insights into these efforts. The symmetrical ideals of holism, interdependence, equality, responsibility, and understanding need to be incorporated not just into the design of these forums, but also into the representational strategies and relational postures that diverse stakeholders and interest groups bring to these forums. These are public relations skills and attitudes, and scholars of symmetrical public relations could make valuable contributions in these areas. Once again, however, special attention needs to be given to ways in which ordinary citizens can overcome the constraints on time and resources that often prevent them from even participating in these forums.

Such an expansion and redirection of public relations research will not be easy. It will require the re-evaluation of deeply rooted premises and well-established research traditions, as described in the first half of this article. It will require new forms of interdisciplinary collaboration, as alluded to earlier. And it will require finding creative and effective strategies to make the results of this research broadly available to the general citizenry. These efforts, moreover, will be frustrated by the academic community’s financial dependence on state agencies with often narrowly defined interests and mandates, as well as by academia’s increasing reliance on
result-based funding from the corporate community itself. These challenges, however, are surmountable. What is needed is a new dialogue among public relations scholars regarding how to rise to the occasion. In fairness, J. Grunig and colleagues already have taken public relations research a good part of the way conceptually—and the intent of this article is not to deride these advances. A practical framework has been developed. The momentum now must be carried through to the research agenda itself.

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