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Breaking from tradition: developing localised discourses in an emerging global discipline

Abstract:

Public relations is a relatively new discipline in the Australian academy, with its earliest certificate and diploma courses beginning in the 1960s (Gleeson forthcoming). Even newer is the Australian literature that services the field – the journals and textbooks that encourage localised discourses amongst students, academics and professionals. With the exceptions of some early dabblings in the 1950s and 1960s, a single text in the 1970s and a 1990s case study book, textbook and journal development began real momentum in Australia in 1999 to 2000. This article traces the development of this literature in Australia, outlining how it broke free from the strangle-hold of North American literature and developed practice and theoretical discourses framed around localised contexts and, increasingly, international perspectives. The article incorporates a case study of the first 21st century textbook in public relations in Australia, co-edited by Clara Zawawi and the author, soon to be published in its fourth edition, and traces its journey through an examination of this changing research, publishing and writing environment.

Biographical notes:

Associate Professor Jane Johnston teaches and researches public relations and journalism at Bond University. She has co-edited (with Clara Zawawi) three editions of *Public relations: theory and practice* (4th ed, co-edited with Mark Sheehan, will be published in 2014) and is sole author of two editions of *Media relations: issues and strategies* (2007 & 2013). She has jointly-edited or authored two other books and more than two dozen chapters and peer reviewed journal articles. In 2013 she received an Australian Government Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) citation for her contribution to public relations curricula, based on the textbooks discussed in this article.

Keywords:

Writing – Public relations – Media relations – Textbooks

Introduction

The year was 1997. The texts in the public relations classrooms of Australian universities were Cutlip, Center and Broom (1996), Wilcox, Nolte and Agee (1995), and Newsom, Vanslyke Turk and Kruckeberg (1996). These texts, as the works cited list below shows, all had one thing in common: they were all American. To a new academic these American texts seemed a reasonable fit for our teaching purposes. After all, my own public relations undergraduate courses at the Queensland Institute of Technology (now QUT) in the 1970s and 1980s were not only taught from US texts but by American professors. It was widely considered that the Americans led the field and US texts were a logical extension of this. The truth was, even if we had wanted to change texts, there were few alternatives aside from a small collection of excellent, but limited, locally written manuals, handbooks and a single case study text written early in the 1990s. Their primary shortcoming was that they did not cover theory, and theory was important to a growing discipline.

At the same time, a groundswell of alternative opinion was emerging. Public relations scholars were speaking out about the American dominance of the field, questioning the dominant paradigm that came with it, as for example:

> Australian scholars joined international discussions about PR pedagogy, research, epistemology and theory, marking a significant shift in thinking from the previously accepted North American-centric approaches to university teaching and scholarship' (Johnston & Macnamara 2013).

This collective voice was to reach a crescendo in 1997 in a themed special-edition of the *Australian journal of communication*, 'Public relations on the edge', which called for a break from this dominance and the development of both localised narratives and broader theoretical perspectives. Journal editor, Ros Petelin, was to later compare the different approaches to a tree (the US) and a rhizome (the rest-of-the-world), by drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of the organisation of knowledge (1987):

> The metaphorical shift from tree to rhizome helps distinguish different approaches. In the arboreal [tree] approach, for example, the Public Relations Society of America's Body of Knowledge project, which arose out of the U.S. experience, suggests an attempt at totalizing knowledge through a linear process that begins from establishing roots and carries through to the latest leaves. In the rhizomatic approach, significant new growth can come from anywhere in the system (Petelin 2005: 458)

Such was the environment in which the first edition of *Public relations: theory and practice* was conceived and written.

Shaky start to a new discourse

While the 'America vs the-rest-of-the-world' divide thus became well documented in the public relations literature of this period, there were other divisions which are also illustrative of the growing pains of public relations. Some of these date back much further than the 1990s debate, and help give a clearer picture of the need for localised and balanced discourses, informed by scholarly research and writing. One early book

provides an example of how the field was perceived and treated, even from within its own ranks. Possibly the first Australian book to include public relations for tertiary education purposes was Ernest Sommerlad's *Mightier than the sword: a handbook on journalism, broadcasting, propaganda, public relations and advertising,* published in 1950. In the book's foreword, the Vice-Chancellor of Sydney University, Stephen Roberts, wrote: 'This book opens an entirely new field because no adequate handbook for the use of students, or those desiring to enter the writing professions, has ever appeared in Australia' (1950: vii). Not only is it described as a 'general synthesis' of these fields, but a 'progressive' alternative to the American and British options of the time (vii). For public relations, though, the promise was painfully unfulfilled. Its single chapter on the industry is brutal in its representation, presented back-to-back with propaganda, described as 'crude', 'crooked', a 'bag of tricks', 'palpable malpractice' and 'dark communication practice' (Sommerlad 1950: 139–41). While Sommerlad, a 'press man', declares he will analyse 'every phase of the newspaper and publicity craft, including broadcasting, advertising, propaganda and public relations' (1950: ix), the book is both simplistic and biased in its coverage of the public relations industry.

Sommerlad would certainly not be the last journalist to position public relations as the dark side of communication but these days, generally speaking, journalists no longer call themselves expert in the field, nor do they attack the industry under the guise of 'philosophical' balance (1950 vii). Bob Burton's *Inside spin* (2007) for instance, written more than fifty years later, takes a similar approach, however Burton's critique is framed as a critical review, whereas Sommerlad's was presented as a balanced account of the professional writing and communication industries.

Sommerlad's treatment of the field highlights several key points: first, the limited understanding of a growing industry; second, the sharp divisions that existed between journalism and public relations; and, third, the negative images that have remained impediments to the field of public relations. Moreover, Sommerlad's handbook also suggests why Australian academics would ultimately come to rely on the plethora of positive, upbeat texts which would come to be presented from the United States.

Early public relations texts

At around the same time as Sommerlad's book was released, the first tertiary lecture in publicity is thought to have been delivered at Sydney University (Gleeson forthcoming), however it was not until the 1960s that public relations was to become part of the mainstream within tertiary institutions (Johnston & Macnamara 2013). The first dedicated public relations book in Australia is believed to be Thomas Dywer's edited manual *The Australian public relations handbook* (1961), however, the first true textbook written for a university audience was *Public relations practice in Australia* edited by David Potts (1976). Potts later became Australia's first professor of public relations, at Mitchell College of Advanced Education in Bathurst, now Charles Sturt University (Morath 2008). Potts' text, produced with the support of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA), advanced the discourse of the

discipline beyond that of a how-to manual, and, for the first time, included a research-led approach. The book's foreword read:

> The Institute has not sought to produce solely a how-to-do-it book, but rather one that combines much practical information with reasoning that goes with the research of communication problems and the implementation of thorough, well-directed communication programmes (np).

Nevertheless, as public relations as a discipline grew and began to thrive within the Australian academy, Potts' book was to go out of print, leaving the growing number of university and college courses to prescribe either imported US texts, industry handbooks or, in the mid-1990s, a single Australian case study text written by Jan Quarles and Bill Rowlings (Johnston & Macnamara 2013).

Arguments for a localised text

By the 1990s, Australian, New Zealand and British scholars had become increasingly critical of the dominance of the North American texts which were seen to present limited paradigms for understanding the industry and contexts which were inconsistent with other cultures or discourses (Johnston & Zawawi 2000a, Singh & Smyth 2000, Motion & Leitch 1999). At the most fundamental level, there was no general introductory Australian text. In an article commissioned for Australia's new scholarly journal, the *Asia Pacific public relations journal*, Clara Zawawi and I wrote a rationale for the development of such a text.

> The overwhelming indication of this body of research data was that an introductory textbook, written by Australian educators for use in a non-North American environment, was needed. Introductory because, in order to break free from a dominant North American paradigm, it is necessary for students to be exposed to a localised narrative from the very beginning. Collaborative because a great deal of work and a great deal of expertise is already available located in universities around the country (Johnston & Zawawi 2000a: 110).

This argument was reflected in the published work of others, who also focussed on the need to allow the development of localised narratives to better reflect the local culture. Public relations scholars Shirley Motion and Judy Leitch drew on the work on Foucault (1980) in arguing for a 'local character' of knowledge: 'Without such freedom to develop, local knowledges [sic] may be suppressed by established ways of thinking and speaking about the world' (1999: 27). This idea is affirmed in Etienne Wenger's work of the same period, which saw the concept of a 'community of practice' emerging out of common understandings of meaning, practice, community and identity, thus enabling new discourses to develop (1998). Wenger later argued how each 'community is engaged in the production of its own practice … through its own local negotiation of meaning' (2009: 4). The sentiment of shared understandings, coupled with the diversity which can flourish within a growing field, was also felt more broadly in teaching and learning circles. As one scholar noted: 'The curriculum, after all, is a selection of elements from the culture and reflects to some extent the diversity that exists within the culture' (Kliebard 1998: 32).

Public relations: theory and practice was driven by all these ideas, and others. We argued that it should do three things: provide a foundational resource for first-year public relations students; present a locally developed text with a global outlook; and, draw together contributions from Australian and New Zealand academics and practitioners. This last priority would ensure diversity of views and opinions, with the editorial policy enabling chapter authors to write to their strengths while keeping the level pitched at a first year university readership. The rhizomic nature of such a text grew organically as Zawawi and I sought the specialist input of our contemporaries, bringing local knowledge together, while exploring contextual variations within the growing international field of public relations, ultimately both embracing and embarking from the US dominant approaches.

Fifteen scholars and practitioners from Australia and New Zealand contributed to the first edition of the text. They were from various universities: Bond, Curtin, Deakin, Edith Cowan, Griffith, RMIT, University of Canberra, University of Technology Sydney and Waikato Management School in New Zealand. For many of us, that first edition pre-dated completion of doctorates, so it was a book full of chapters which drew from industry and teaching experience. A higher level of research, reflected in authorial PhD completions, was included in the following editions of 2004, 2009 and 2014. In this way, the textbook can somewhat be seen to parallel the growth of the discipline. Notably, only three of the academic authors in the first edition (as opposed to practitioner authors) held PhDs. By the 2009 edition, this number had grown to eight, illustrating how 'the sophistication and scholarship of this third edition reflects advances and developments in the public relations industry and the academy during this decade' (Johnston & Zawawi 2009: ix).

Literature reflects diverse perspectives

The ongoing discussion and vibrant scholarly debate during the 1990s was emblematic of the disparate and varied public relations theories and discourses which were emerging. Petelin noted how these clashing ideas became instrumental to change. In her invited essay to *Public relations review* in 2005, she explained how that earlier themed edition of the journal seemed 'to catalyze a trend of greater global openness' (46). She wrote:

> Locally, the 1997 special issue sparked strong controversy. Despite, or perhaps because of, the controversy, it also probably helped establish the confidence, the openness, and the market to expand the field's publishing outlets. In 1999, the first issue of a new, regionally based, discipline-dedicated journal, the *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, appeared. A year later, Johnston and Zawawi (2000) edited their Australian *Public Relations: Theory and Practice* collection, which, while in textbook form, provided the first substantial book collection by local writers that was more than a basic manual. It has since gone to an even more theoretically informed, and enlarged, second edition (2005: 461).

Petelin's essay drew reflexively on her role as journal editor, signifying two key aspects of the development of discipline-specific discourses. The first is highlighted in the previous quote; that is, she identifies how concrete changes and a widening of

approaches were to materialise out of the debate and, second, her role was to show how, as a journal editor, she enabled the debate to take place. 'I had not realized the importance of editorial strategy to local aspirants in developing their field' (2005: 459) she wrote. Her sentiment is supported by others who stress the important role of journals in carving out and tracking the development of a discipline. Canadian scholar Carolyne Van der Meer called this 'a map to the evolution of a discipline [which] can be inestimable' (2004: 172). In public relations, the editors of the first edition of the *Asia Pacific public relations journal* noted: 'it is time to open a new front for discussing the role of public relations in society that gives prominence to what is happening in the countries of Asia, Australia and New Zealand' (Singh & Smyth 1999: np). Likewise, *TEXT* journal has seen commendation for its significant role in developing creative writing. 'Without *TEXT*, the practice, research, and pedagogy of creative writing at the university level would be in dire straits', stated Professor Kurt Heizelman from the University of Texas (Brophy & Krauth 2012).

It is not a big leap to extend this philosophy to the development of textbooks. Certainly, these ideals of encouraging local narratives and opening up and developing culturally-relevant discourses underpinned the development of *Public relations: theory and practice* in 2000. Our philosophy was to develop a nationally significant book which reflected local contexts, cultures, business approaches, case studies, and ethical and legal frameworks. As the learning and teaching literature suggests, once key concepts in a discipline are understood they will change students' understanding of a whole area 'sometimes dramatically' (Biggs & Tang 2011: 93).

In their study of the role of textbooks and other teaching tools in Australian universities, Horsley, Knight and Huntly found that textbooks not only embody a community of practice discourse that reflect the shared understandings of a discipline, but they also reflect the history and development of the discipline (2010: 47). Others also argue of the importance of discipline-specific discourses and cultures (Stockton 1995): 'Reading and writing at university is infused by the cultural context of a particular discipline or field so that academic literacies are located, described, interpreted and studied in disciplinary contexts' (Richardson 2004: 505).

This positive approach is, however, far from universal – others suggest that the nature of textbooks is too prescriptive. Paxton's study of economics texts found:

> the first year economics textbook in particular, rather than exposing students to a variety of arguments and encouraging the development of critical reading skills appropriate for academic contexts, tends to be single voiced. This gives the impression of consensus in the discipline (2007: 109).

In shaping student learning and writing, textbooks are seen as the authoritative disciplinary canon (Richardson 2004) which can result in a lack of contestation, thus shutting down critique and free-thinking by students (Harré 1990). At its worst, this can lead to 'pedagogical barrenness' (Richardson 2004: 506). Such critiques clearly separate the development of textbooks and journals.

However, in defence of the textbook, or our textbook at least, the development of *Public relations: theory and practice*, was driven by the desire to challenge the one-size-fits-all approach, and Zawawi and I always anticipated, and welcomed, the

coming of new literature and approaches. And as the discursive practice of the discipline has evolved and matured, so too has this field of writing. Macnamara, for example, argued that the existing Australian texts (there are now several) remained too US-focussed (2012a), and then published his own (Macnamara 2012b).

The driving-force behind *Public relations: theory and practice* was to provide an Australian alternative, never an 'authorial canon'. By the second edition in 2004, we departed even further from the US texts in the field to expand our concept of public relations to the 'third sector' – that part of society that is neither business nor government, but inclusive of not-for-profits, NGOs and grassroots activism. This, we argued, catered to 'the growing trend in democratisation of communication' (Johnston & Zawawi 2004: 6). We pointed out that the use of the term 'organisation' in defining public relations was too prescriptive and 'tended to place the existence of public relations too firmly within the corporate context' (2004: 6), noting that: 'Developments such as the growth of anti-globalisation coalitions, which by their very nature are anti-organisational but which use these same tools against the corporations, make a new approach and a new definition necessary' (2004: 6).

We were thus extending our definition to a broader, more critical understanding of the discipline: one which better reflected not only the disparate and varied practices in Australia, but internationally. The highly successful chapter by Kristin Demetrious brought corporate citizenship, Habermas' ideas of cultural impoverishment and Bech's notions of the risk society and global issues of scarcity to the theoretical mix. Positioned alongside the chapters on corporate and government public relations, it provided options and alternatives without fear or favour. We saw our role of editors as helping to enable the discourse to expand, sometimes presenting disparate approaches side-by-side. One challenge, then, as now, was to bring uniformity to the tone and style of the book, for clarity and ease of use, without homogenising the individual authorial voices.

Challenges, ERA and new editions

Palgrave Macmillan's Suzannah Burywood states while a text should try to move a field forward, it should not be too far ahead because it may be too limited (ctd. in Times Higher Education 2007). Such is the balancing act of the textbook writer. But the update-or-perish approach to textbooks, and the massive workload it brings, is paradoxically placed alongside the lack of external recognition. As one UK commentator notes: 'Successful titles will regularly need to go into new editions … [though] you are unlikely to receive recognition for your work in the research assessment exercise' (Phillips ctd. in Times Higher Education 2007: np).

Australian textbook writers are all too familiar with the Federal Government's research framework which stipulates:

> The following types of books are unlikely to meet the eligibility criteria for the 'Book' research output type: textbooks; anthologies; edited books; books that are not published by a commercial publisher and/or offered for sale; and revisions or new editions (Commonwealth Government 2011: 35).

The exception to this, it notes, may be found in the new and hard-fought category of 'non-traditional research outputs' (Commonwealth Government 2011: 41). ERA's most recent definition says:

> research is defined as the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings. This could include synthesis and analysis of previous research to the extent that it is new and creative (Commonwealth Government 2011: 9).

Yet, despite the last sentence of this definition pertaining to many, many textbooks, they remain excluded from the count. As confusing and ambiguous as it is, it is not surprising that several chapters in the first and subsequent editions of *Public relations: theory and practice* were submitted as research outcomes while others (my own included) were not, depending on how individual universities read the rules.

But, while edited texts may be considered the bottom-feeders in university research outputs by ERA's standards, textbooks can, and do, contribute to curriculum construction and provide the foundations for the development and expansion of disciplines and there are ways their contribution can be acknowledged. As this edition of *TEXT* went to print, I was awarded a Federal Government Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) citation for the role played by these textbooks in the development of Australian public relations curricula. This was partially founded on the positive feedback provided by students, academics and members of the industry.

The years following the first publication of *Public relations: theory and practice* have seen an exciting snowball of writing and publishing within the discipline. In a recent review of the growth of literature in the field Macnamara and I found that:

> As the first decade of the 2000s progressed, it was as if the Australian PR academic community came to realise the stark lack of localised books in both specialist and generalist fields. A relative rush of new books appeared (Johnston & Macnamara 2013).

In just over a decade, Australian authors in the discipline developed and wrote texts or research monographs on topics as varied as research, lobbying, media relations, activism, campaigns and corporate communications, and these were published in Australia and internationally. One of these was *Media relations: issues and strategies* (2007) which I sole authored. Conscious of the restricted definitions of research discussed above, this book was strategically positioned outside of the textbook definition. *Media relations: issues and strategies* was borne of the need to combine theory, critical analysis and practical application about a specialised field of public relations within an Australian context. Always intended to service both a student and industry need, my intention was that the book should also be given every opportunity of achieving research status. While it was informed by my research it also needed a practical approach. Ultimately, the omission of the word 'text' anywhere in the book, or its back cover, and the exclusion of tutorial exercises or further readings, coupled with the description of it as a 'professional reference' resource, helped see the book move through the ERA gauntlet and be classed as a sole-authored research output.

Future of public relations textbooks

In her excellent treatise on the development of Australian public relations literature, Petelin argued for the need to 'de-territorialize' existing knowledge blocs and 're-territorialize' these into localised spaces (2005: 462). She stated that local knowledge and cultural variance within new publications would ultimately impact and expand the discipline as a whole. This was the challenge that arguably began in the 1950s but has gained momentum since the first edition of *Public relations: theory and practice* was conceived in 1997 and published in 2000. This 're-territorialising' has certainly gained traction, and Australia now has a vibrant public relations literature which has found its place in a growing international publishing landscape (Johnston & Macnamara 2013).

Another part of cultural growth is, however, the need to technologically update. That ERA rejects the idea of the textbook may soon become a moot point as the textbook industry itself argues away the term. Chief Executive of Pearson Learning Solutions, Don Kilburn, points out: 'We've gone from being a textbook company to being a learning company' (in Young 2013: np). Pearson is joined by other mainstream publishers like McGraw-Hill and Macmillan which have begun talking up major changes in textbook and learning delivery, such as the embedding of video lectures within e-textbooks. In an article titled 'Don't call them textbooks', Jeffrey Young explains:

> One publisher calls its products 'personalized learning experience,' another 'courseware,' and one insists on using its own brand name, 'MindTap.' For now, this new product could be called 'the object formerly known as the textbook' (2013: np).

So, why write this article if publishers believe that textbooks are doomed to redundancy? There is little doubt that e-books are one way forward but, for now, I will still call the object in question a 'textbook', with my own experience to date showing that sales of hardcopies are still by far the popular choice over e-books within the academy.

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