The Definition, Dimensions, and Domain of Public Relations

James G. Hutton

ABSTRACT: By not developing a widely accepted definition and a central organizing principle or paradigm, the field of public relations has left itself vulnerable (1) to other fields that are making inroads into public relations' traditional domain, and (2) to critics who are filling in their own definitions of public relations. While opportunities abound, public relations is unlikely to fulfill its promise until it is willing and able to identify its fundamental nature and scope. This article proposes a definition ("managing strategic relationships"), along with a three-dimensional framework, with which to compare competing philosophies of public relations and from which to build a paradigm for the field.

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From its modern beginnings early in this century, public relations has suffered from an identity crisis—largely of its own making. In terms of both theory and practice, public relations has failed to arrive at a broadly accepted definition of itself in terms of its fundamental purpose, its dominant metaphor, its scope, or its underlying dimensions.

Particularly disturbing is that despite a number of clearly articulated notions about the public relations field's nature and purpose, especially in its early decades as a modern social, political, and commercial function, there seems to have been little progress made in the way of consolidation and development of its basic tenets.
Some might argue that the lack of consolidation has been natural, perhaps even appropriate, given that public relations has evolved and adapted to its social milieu over the first century of its existence. That argument does not fully explain, however, why the field of public relations has not articulated in any depth even its most basic premises such as the nature of "relations" or "relationships."

The void has been filled by those outside the field, primarily its critics. The result has been that public relations has come to be associated with a variety of denotations and connotations, mostly negative, including such recent monikers as "spin" or "spin control" or "spin doctoring." While public relations is still a relatively new field of scholarship and practice, it needs to reach some sort of general agreement ("consensus" is too strong a word) if it wishes to advance as a scholarly and professional endeavor.

The purposes of this article are to propose a definition of public relations; explore some of the implications of that definition, in terms of the domain of public relations; propose a three-dimensional framework by which to analyze public relations theories and practice; and encourage the process of integration, rather than disintegration, of the field.

DEFINITIONS, METAPHORS, AND PHILOSOPHIES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

A review of modern public relations' short history suggests a number of definitions, metaphors or approaches to the field. Public relations pioneer Ivy Lee was never quite sure what to call himself, but focused on honesty, understanding, and compromise to ensure a "proper adjustment of the interrelations" of public and business. He often thought of himself as an information provider, but also as a kind of "lawyer" representing his clients in the court of public opinion. Edward Bernays' definition, interestingly, also included the notion of adjustment: "Public relations is the attempt, by information, persuasion and adjustment, to engineer public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution."

In the mid-1970s, Harlow reviewed the evolution of public relations definitions. Through the first two or three decades of this century, "using communication to build and hold goodwill" was the dominant theme in public relations, according to Harlow. The focus on publicity and propaganda began to wane in the 1920s and '30s, and definitions abounded during the 1940s: "a guide to social conduct"; "social and political engineering"; "developer of goodwill"; "builder of public opinion"; "motivator"; "persuader"; "clarifier." In the 1950s and '60s, other metaphors were added to the list: "lubricant," "pilot," "catalyst," "spotlight," "interpreter," and "devil's advocate."

In another mid-70s article, Harlow built a working definition that was condensed from 472 different definitions and the input from 65 practitioners:

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-
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operation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.

In the mid-1990s, Stuart Ewen's review of public relations history noted still other definitions and metaphors: public relations as educator, creator and/or manipulator of symbols, news engineer, publicity doctor, perception manager, and middleperson.

A review of more recent public relations definitions in textbooks and academic literature suggests a number of common themes but no true convergence. In fact, at least two of the major introductory textbooks offer no definition per se, but outline characteristics of public relations practice. The most common definitional components appear to be “management,” “organization,” and “publics.” Practitioner definitions tend to focus on “management,” “organization,” and “publics” as well. For example, a widely quoted definition from Denny Griswold, which first appeared in the Public Relations News: “Public relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the public interest, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.”

From one perspective, it might be said that public relations has evolved from “the public be fooled” to “the public be damned” to “the public be manipulated” to “the public be informed” to “the public be involved or accommodated.” Unfortunately, however, nothing even close to a consensus has emerged from all of these definitions. The situation today seems little different than 40 years ago, when, as one writer put it, public relations was “a brotherhood of some 100,000 whose common bond is its profession and whose common woe is that no two of them can ever quite agree on what that profession is.”

A standard criticism of public relations definitions is that they tend to be focused more on the effects of public relations and/or the specific tasks that practitioners engage in, rather than on its fundamental purpose. Another common criticism is that many of the academic definitions are normative or prescriptive, rather than descriptive of public relations' true function in contemporary commerce and politics. For example, the concept of persuasion is very much a part of everyday practice, yet few academic definitions include persuasion as a basic tenet. Similarly, few academic or even practitioner-organizations' definitions of public relations address the issue of manipulating public opinion, but many major agencies still define their primary business in those terms. For example, two top Burson-Marsteller executives wrote: “Public relations is the art and science of creating, altering, strengthening or overcoming public opinion.”

Taken as a whole, academic definitions of public relations can be criticized on several other counts. For example, most definitions do not identify their core
concept (e.g., "communication" or "relationships"), and even those that do identify their core concept do not develop it in a substantive way. Virtually all of the definitions speak to the issue of "organizations," ignoring the practice of public relations for individuals or groups of people who are not formally organized. Perhaps most important, the definitions, both individually and collectively, lack the richness of thought and the eloquence of simplicity that characterized many of the historical definitions of the field.

Complicating matters in the academic world are attempts by scholars to force-fit theory from other fields onto public relations. For example, Gordon's proposal that "public relations is the active participation in social construction of meaning," in keeping with Blumer's "symbolic interactionism," lacks discriminant validity. Such definitions, which fail to distinguish public relations not just from other communication fields but also from large areas of sociology, psychology and cultural studies, simply muddy the waters. They are akin to the problems associated with Bagozzi's definition of marketing as "exchange," which sounded promising at first blush, but was so comprehensive that it did not distinguish marketing from economics, communication and other fields.

Interestingly, compared with the academic world, the range and diversity of terms and definitions for public relations in the practitioner world are larger and arguably more eclectic. Unfortunately, that diversity appears to be less the result of creativity and divergent philosophies than the result of misunderstanding, confusion, superficiality, a lack of business knowledge, and an exodus from the sematic baggage of the term "public relations."

The decline of "public relations" as the field's guiding descriptive term has been noted for many years now. Olasky, among many others, has noted that practitioners of public relations have become associated with a litany of derogatory terms such as "tools of the top brass," "hucksters," "parrots," "low-life liars" and "impotent, evasive, egomaniacal, and lying." Adams reports that in 1992 only about 75 of the Fortune 500 companies were using some form of the phrase "public relations" and in 1997 only six of the top 50 public relations firms used the term in their title. At his recent induction into the Arthur W. Page Society's Hall of Fame, Daniel J. Edelman said that "our mission is to bring honor and respect to the term 'public relations' rather than discarding it." Despite Edelman's pleadings, the temptation to get out from under the term has been too great for most top practitioners in the corporate arena, paralleling the trend toward "image/perception/reputation management" in the agency world.

The rise of terms such as "reputation management," "perception management," and "image management" appears to be an ominous trend for the field, partly because they have come into favor for most of the wrong reasons: the tendency of managers who lack training in public relations to think in superficial terms like "image" and "perception"; the large number of major public relations firms that are owned by advertising agencies, who tend to be more comfortable with such terms; and the desire to bury the negative connotations of "public relations," once and for all. As David Finn, Doug Newsom and others have pointed out, however, concepts such as "reputation" and "image" are not gener-
ally something that can be managed directly, but are omnipresent and the global result of a firm’s or individual’s behavior.

Further complicating things in the practitioner world, beyond the addition of new terms, is the use of old and new terms in different ways. “Corporate communications,” which used to be mostly a synonym for “public relations” in corporations, is now being used by many individuals to mean an organization’s internal communications. “Public affairs,” which used to refer to government relations or a combination of government, community, and related communications, is now a frequent substitute for “public relations.”

A major consequence of the semantic confusion surrounding public relations is that, contrary to much talk about “integrated” communications, the public relations field is generally disintegrating. Particularly the higher-end functions (i.e., those that are best paid and closest to top management), such as investor relations and government relations, are being lost to other functional areas within organizations.

For example, the National Investor Relations Institute reported that the percentage of investor relations managers reporting to the chief financial officer or treasurer (rather than the chief public-relations officer) rose from 44% to 56% in just the 4-year span from 1988 to 1992. Similarly, many corporate public relations departments have lost responsibility for crisis communications to management consulting firms and marketing departments (e.g., the American Marketing Association now publishes a book called *Crisis Marketing*); responsibility for corporate identity programs has sometimes been lost to marketing; government relations to the legal department; and internal/employee communications to the human resources department. The extreme of this phenomenon was illustrated by Burger King a few years ago when it “integrated” its communications function into the organization by disbanding the public relations department. Its media relations (the only communications function that could not half-way logically be assigned to another functional area with the organization) was given to the “diversity” department.

To the extent it loses key components to other functional areas, public relations becomes more vulnerable to being subordinated entirely by another function, such as marketing or human resources. In some cases, public relations people are willingly subordinating themselves to functions such as marketing. One agency owner, for example, declared that “the central doctrine of public relations is molding news and public opinion to match a marketing strategy.” Another possible threat to the whole of public relations is represented by “stakeholder relations,” a growing topic in the management departments of business schools.

"DIMENSIONS" OF PUBLIC RELATIONS: THE MISSING THEORETICAL LINK?

One of the major problems in reconciling the long list of public relations definitions is that little research has explored what might be termed...
the fundamental “dimensions” of public relations. Grunig and Hunt’s25 “four models” typology is the basis for numerous articles and the largest sponsored research project in the field’s history,26 yet there is little evidence that the underlying dimensions—direction of communication (one-way or two-way) and balance of intended effects (asymmetrical or symmetrical)—discriminate among the many public relations theories or practice philosophies,27 or are causally related to any substantive measure of organizational success.

Cancel et al.28 question the discrete nature of the “four models” dimensions by suggesting that a continuum is a more appropriate framework. They also focus on only one of the two dimensions (the “balance of intended effects,” or how much the public relations activities are intended to serve the client’s versus the public’s interest) as the basis for their “Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations.” While their premise represents an important step forward in theory development, neither theory nor empirical data suggest that only one dimension is likely to provide a framework for all of the basic public relations theories, philosophies, or orientations. Among the many other candidates to represent the underlying critical dimensions of public relations theory and practice: perception vs. reality, short-term vs. long-term goals, degree of honesty, amount of research, number of stakeholders (and the specific stakeholders selected), internal vs. external orientation, image vs. substance, level of effect (awareness vs. attitude vs. behavior), and level of initiative (reactive vs. pro-active).

While yet to be tested, the hypothesis presented here, based largely on a reading of public relations theories-in-use but also on existing academic theory, is that three dimensions are the candidates most likely to explain the substantive differences among the various orientations or definitions of public relations. For the sake of simplicity and memorability, the dimensions may be referred to as the “3 I’s”: interest, initiative, and image.

The “interest” dimension is analogous to the “balance of intended effects” proposed by Grunig and Hunt and refined by Cancel et al.29 The question it answers is, “To what degree is the public relations function focused on client interests versus the public interest?” At one extreme lies a philosophy of “The public be damned,” while at the other extreme lies a belief that the public’s interest should supersede the client’s interest (not eliminating the possibility, of course, that the organization will ultimately benefit by its beneficence).

The second dimension, “initiative,” answers the question, “To what extent is the public relations function reactive versus pro-active?” Almost every practitioner can relate to this issue, which can be measured largely by public relations activities designed to anticipate and help shape emerging organizational issues. Among the common practitioner techniques indicative of pro-activity are stakeholder surveys, communication audits, crisis planning, issues management, and strategic communications planning.

The third dimension, “image,” answers the question, “To what extent is the organization focused on perception vs. reality (or image vs. substance)?” Certainly the two ends of the scale are not mutually exclusive, but this dimension represents the general focus of an organization’s or individual’s philosophy, thoughts and
actions. As a practical matter, it is generally not difficult to determine the relative
focus of a given public relations function on a perception/reality or image/
substance continuum. Richard Nixon’s admonition during the Watergate scandal,
“Let’s PR it,” might represent one end of the continuum, while an anonymous
corporate gift to a charitable organization might represent the other extreme.

It is important to note that a given public relations function can cover a
range of territory on each dimension, given the contingency nature of public
relations practice. It is quite conceivable that an organization’s public relations
activities can be pro-active and reactive, oriented toward image and substance, and
client-centered and public-centered—all in the same day. Even a brief reading of
the organization’s public relations structure, plan and general activities, however,
normally would be enough to locate the organization’s general orientation along
each dimension.

It is also quite possible that a fourth dimension or additional dimensions
(e.g., “interactivity,” to capture one-way vs. two-way communication) might pro-
vide additional insight, but such additions might destroy the model’s parsimony
and its ability to be depicted in a relatively simple graphic form.

A FRAMEWORK FOR DEFINITIONS OF
PUBLIC RELATIONS

The three-dimensional cube created by “initiative,” “interest,” and “image” provides a framework by which to analyze various definitions of
public relations. Figure 1 (“A Three-Dimensional Framework for Analyzing Public
Relations Theory and Practice”) provides a judgment-based interpretation of
where current public relations definitions may lie, in three-dimensional space.

When analyzed in the context of this framework, there appear to be six
relatively distinct orientations or models of public relations practice: persuasion,
advocacy, public information, cause-related public relations, image/reputation
management, and relationship management.

Persuasion

This category includes those philosophies of public rela-
tions that are pro-active and oriented toward persuading audiences to think or act
in ways that benefit the client organization (“client organization” referring to
either an individual, group, or organization). Public relations programs or cam-
paigns that focus on promotion, propaganda or the “engineering of consent” all
fall in this category, distinguished from each other primarily by their strategic
tenets and choice of tactics rather than their basic purpose. For example, a promo-
tional campaign that utilizes media publicity and product placements in feature
films might be using an agenda-setting style of persuasion by attempting to place
the client-organization’s product on consumers’ mental agendas, with the goal of
increasing awareness and ultimately sales of the product. In contrast, a pro-choice
or antiabortion campaign might utilize propaganda as its fundamental communications strategy, including standard propaganda tactics such as demonizing opponents, telling only the client-organization’s side of the story, creating or manipulating symbols of various kinds, exploiting young people, and appealing to emotions much more than reason in order to affect public opinion and effect legislation favorable to the client-organization’s position. It is important to note that persuasion, as used here, encompasses a wide range of strategies from a variety of fields, including sociology, social psychology, experimental psychology, cognitive psychology, semiotics, communications and marketing.


Definition, Dimensions, and Domain

Advocacy

Advocacy is similar to persuasion in its intentions—persuading audiences to think or act in ways that benefit the client-organization—but substantially different in its level of initiative and in the fact that it arises out of controversy or active opposition. The analogy is to law, insofar as public relations serves the role of defending the client-organization in the court of public opinion, rather than (or in addition to) a court of law. “Defending” does not necessarily mean defensive tactics, however, given that an aggressive offense is often the best defense. The presence of controversy or active opposition usually dictates the type of strategy and tactics used, and the reactive nature of advocacy public relations (as defined here) means that a public relations counsel or function may not exist until triggered by a crisis or other catalyst. In addition, the focus is often on persuading relevant audiences not to think or act in certain ways.

Public Information

“Public information” refers to the style of public relations in which a client-organization serves primarily as an educator and information clearinghouse. Examples might include industry trade associations and other member services organizations, along with some government agencies that perform a similar function.

Cause-Related

Cause-related public relations also is similar to persuasion in its intentions (persuading audiences to think or act in specific ways) and is similar in its level of initiative (usually quite pro-active). It differs, however, in that there may not even be a client-organization per se, and the purpose is to benefit the general welfare of a citizenry, rather than a client-organization. It is similar to advocacy, as the term is used here, in that it may be reactive and nonexistent until triggered by a public event. It other ways, however, it is the complement of advocacy, insofar as it tends to serve a broader public interest rather than any special-interest group or individual. In terms of its tactics, cause-related public relations is often distinguished by its need to marshal strong but unorganized public and media support through grassroots lobbying and publicity. Such programs or campaigns may operate with little or no opposition, in some cases, while battling strong special-interest opposition in other cases. Examples of groups or organizations who practice cause-related public relations include the United Way, the American Red Cross, the Arthritis Foundation, the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society, MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving), the League of Women Voters, antismoking groups, and perhaps self-proclaimed public interest groups such as Common Cause, Consumers Union, the Sierra Club, the American Automobile Association, and Amnesty International. The corresponding metaphor for cause-related public relations is generally crusader.
Image/Reputation Management

This focuses on the image or reputation of the client-organization, as measured by its popularity or value as a supplier, buyer, partner, employer, lender, citizen or investment. While not necessarily ignoring the substance of an individual’s or organization’s public relationships, image/reputation management looks primarily to publicity, spin control and the creation and manipulation of symbols as its primary tactics. It has grown in importance recently, but has deep roots in the practices of Ivy Lee and other public relations pioneers. A distinction might be made between image and reputation management, to the extent that reputation could be considered somewhat less superficial than image, with a correspondingly greater emphasis on reputable behavior as the foundation of a good reputation.

Relationship Management

Relationship management refers to the practice of public relations as an exercise in identifying mutual interests, values and benefit between a client-organization and its publics. While acting primarily on the client’s behalf, such an approach to public relations seeks to have the client operate in a responsible manner, in conformance with the public interest, in the belief that public support and consent are vital to the organization in achieving its long-term objectives. The emphasis is on mutual trust, compromise, cooperation, and whenever possible, win-win situations.

“MANAGING STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIPS”

If the field of public relations wishes to be master of its own destiny, it must settle on a definition. Each of the alternative metaphors—public relations as (1) persuader, (2) advocate, (3) educator or dispenser of information, (4) crusader, (5) image-maker or reputation manager, or (6) relationship builder/manager—has strengths, proponents, and practitioners. Only one, however, has the power to both define and serve as a paradigm (organizing philosophy or model) for the field: relationship management.

From one perspective, the proposed paradigm can be derived by process of elimination. As defined here, “advocate,” “educator/information dispenser,” and “crusader” are too narrow to describe the field, and “image-maker” or “reputation manager” are too superficial to describe the practice or aspirations of public relations. “Persuader ” is a strong candidate, but does not provide the discriminant validity necessary to distinguish public relations from sales, marketing, politics or perhaps even journalism.

From a more pro-active perspective, “relationship management” does an excellent job of capturing the essential elements of the field. The specific definition of public relations proposed here, “managing strategic relationships,” is slightly
stronger still. “Managing” implies planning, control, feedback and performance measurement. “Strategic” implies planning, prioritization, action orientation and a focus on relationships most relevant to client-organization goals. Finally, “relationships” implies effective communication, mutual adaptation, mutual dependency, shared values, trust and commitment.

That three-word definition has potential weaknesses, of course. For example, some might argue that it should be “managing strategic relationships with enabling publics” to denote that, as a staff function, public relations is usually not an organization’s primary interface with “operating” or “line” publics such as suppliers and customers. (Enabling publics, in this context, refers to those publics whose consent is important or essential to the organization’s continued survival and efficient operation, “enabling” the organization to fulfill its primary operating function of providing goods or services to its customers.)

Others might suggest that relationships are not something that can be “managed” or controlled as well or as directly as the definition might suggest. Still others might assert that the definition does not capture the aggressive persuasion and promotion efforts that are so often characteristic of public relations. It is argued here, however, that while the three words may not be entirely accurate in their description of the field, they serve as a partly descriptive, partly prescriptive, workable paradigm for a field desperately in need of one.

Many observers of the field will recognize that the proposed definition is actually very traditional, in that it is very similar to the one offered by Cutlip, Center, and Broom,30 except that it allows for individuals (as well as organizations) to be clients.

Few observers of the field, however, appear to be aware that other fields are more advanced than public relations in developing what should be the central, organizing theme of public relations theory and practice—relationships. Rather than teaching other fields about relationships, public relations appears to be just beginning to learn about relationships from those fields.

Pavlik31 and Broom et al.32 reported that while relationships are often discussed in public relations as a central theme or the central theme in the field, (1) the term is seldom even defined, and (2) there is essentially no substantive research in the field of public relations regarding the measurement of relationships, the theoretical constructs of relationships, or relationships as the unit of analysis. Broom et al. “found the same paucity of useful definitions in the literature of other fields in which the concept of relationships is central,” including interpersonal communication, psychotherapy, interorganizational relationships, and systems theory.

Surprisingly, however, Broom et al. overlooked a wealth of information from a rather closely related field—marketing. For a number of years, from the 1950s into the early 1970s, relationships (especially the power dimensions of relationships, in the context of marketing channels) were a major theme of the marketing literature. More recently and more relevant to public relations, “relationship marketing” has been an emerging paradigm in marketing for a number of years now. Broom et al.’s omission of marketing as a domain of relationship theory
is particularly puzzling given that some of the relationship-marketing theory deals with precisely the issues they were attempting to explain, such as the antecedents and consequences of relationships.

For example, one of the marketing theories directly relevant to public relations was titled the "commitment/trust" theory of relationship marketing. In their model, Morgan and Hunt posit trust and commitment as the core of relationships in a marketing context. The antecedents include shared values ("corporate culture," in public relations terms), communication, and the costs of exiting the relationship. The desired outcomes or consequences of trust and commitment include acquiescence, (reduction in) uncertainty, cooperation, and functional (as opposed to dysfunctional) conflict. The authors make a compelling case for their theory, including an empirical pilot test of their trust/commitment model with a competing model, using higher-order statistical techniques.

It is difficult to overestimate the potential contribution of Hunt and Morgan's path-analytic approach to the study of relationships and to public relations theory, for two major reasons. First, such an approach breaks relationships down into their components, so that (1) individual components can be studied and measured, and (2) both theorists and practitioners can likely identify the point(s) of breakdown in a relationship, thereby leading to greater effectiveness in managing the relationship. Second, different types of relationships, conceivably, could be studied and managed more efficiently. For example, the most relevant "outcome" or measure of an organization's relationship with the financial community might be a reduction in uncertainty, while the most desired manifestation of an organization's relationship with its employees might be acquiescence. While some combination of trust and commitment (the central elements of the model) are presumed to be essential to any relationship, communication (in the form of accurate financial information) and the cost of exiting the relationship (the transaction costs associated with selling the company's stock) might be the most important antecedents in the case of the financial community, while shared values might be much more important to relationships with employees.

CONCLUSIONS, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Olasky lamented what he described as "The Aborted Debate Within Public Relations," during the late 1950s and early 1960s, about what should be the fundamental purpose or nature of public relations. According to Olasky, the public relations profession chose not to challenge Edward Bernay's paradigm developed during the 1920s (including advocacy of the client's position and concurrent lack of concern for objectivity) because it was too lucrative for its practitioners: "The public relations occupation was too profitable for its beneficiaries to accept the reformation and reconstruction that paradigm changes require. . . . The trade was made: acceptance of a low status for public relations in return for acceptance of fat paychecks."
While his assessment of the reason may or may not be accurate, Olasky's basic observation about the lack of theory development in public relations appears to be correct, and still applicable more than a dozen years later. One of the primary purposes of the definition and framework presented here is to encourage the recognition and development of strategic relationships as the dominant paradigm that the public relations field so desperately needs if it hopes to advance in either theory or practice.

While not without flaw, "managing strategic relationships" offers a parsimonious definition of public relations that is easily communicated, relevant for both theory and practice, and not so broad as to be meaningless nor so narrow as to be overly limiting. The proposed three-word definition is analogous to Edward Bernays' "engineering of consent" (an abbreviation of a somewhat longer definition, and arguably the most memorable and important definition in public relations history), insofar as it is simple and straightforward enough for the average person to understand easily, yet accurate enough to describe sophisticated public relations programs. Importantly, it also represents an effort to help move public relations theory and practice forward, evolving from Bernays' primary focus on manipulating and adapting to public opinion, toward a focus on relationships.

At the same time, the proposed three-dimensional framework provides a conceptual foundation by which to compare various philosophies of public relations. It challenges both scholars and practitioners to help determine exactly what are the underlying, defining dimensions of the field—a step that is often essential in paradigm development.

Together, the proposed definition and framework suggest a hierarchy of public relations' primary roles, functions and tactics:

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<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;managing strategic relationships&quot;</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Situational roles</th>
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<tr>
<td>persuader, advocate, educator, crusader, information provider, reputation manager</td>
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<tr>
<th>Primary functions performed</th>
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<tr>
<td>research, image making, counseling, managing, early warning, interpreting, communicating, negotiating</td>
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<tr>
<th>Tactics/tools utilized</th>
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<td>publicity, product placements, news releases, speeches, interpersonal communications, web sites, publications, trade shows, corporate identity programs, corporate advertising programs, etc.</td>
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The potential benefit of such a hierarchy is that it encourages both scholars and practitioners to distinguish between the umbrella definition of public relations and the primary purpose or objective of public relations in a given context ("situational roles"). Similarly, it encourages a distinction between public relations roles and the
“functions” of public relations, which are not end goals in themselves but means by which a given objective is achieved. In turn, “tactics” are the specific tools used to perform various functions. For example, “counseling” and “publicity” do not define public relations or even its purpose, but are simply one possible function and one possible tactic of public relations.

To accept the proposed definition, framework and paradigm, the public relations field will have to let go of some long-standing ideas. Both scholars and practitioners, most of whom were trained in journalism schools or other communication disciplines, may have to abandon the idea that communication, per se, is the bedrock of public relations. It appears that public relations has evolved to the point that communication is a necessary but no longer sufficient foundation for public relations; training in social psychology, anthropology, and other social sciences (not to mention new technologies) is necessary, in addition to business, management and perhaps industry-specific training. Also, public relations scholars must let go of concepts such as the “four models of PR,” which never met the requirements of a theory, in the first place, has failed the test of empirical confirmation, and has strangled theoretical development in the field.

While the adjustments may be difficult for some in the field of public relations, the alternative is continued disintegration of a field that is drifting rather aimlessly and in many different directions, largely without even a definition, much less an organizing theory or paradigm. The likely result is that neighboring disciplines will continue to annex large chunks of public relations’ domain, frequently relegating public relations to minor roles.

On the other hand, if the public relations field seizes the opportunity at hand (emulating what is already the current practice of some of the very best practitioners in the field), it will be in prime position to provide leadership in relationship building and complementary new interactive technologies—two of the most important organizing elements of the next century.

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NOTES

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6. Ibid., pp. 157, 171.
7. Ibid., p. 76.
8. Ibid., p. 84.
9. Ibid., p. 151.
27. Amanda F. Cancel, Glen T. Cameron, Lynne M. Sallot and Michael A. Mirrore, “It
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
34. Marvin N. Olasky, 1984, op. cit.