

# How Public Relations is Defined: Seven Distinctive Trends

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Public relations scholarship has encountered challenges within the discipline and critiques from others in response to attempts to define its roles and identify its contributions to an organization and the public. Indeed, Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2006) argued that public relations professionals and researchers have struggled to develop measurements to prove effectiveness and specify the added value of public relations. Past measures included the advertising value of press clippings and established readership of publications, but none of the items attempted to measure the monetary return of public relations, which is at the center of the management's interest in profit organizations. In addition, The Isthmus (2012) claimed that there were wide criticisms from the public, as public relations was still viewed not at all different from advertising, insofar as they both created messages aimed at gaining acceptance for an offering. They added that representations of public relations were often exaggerated and satirized in popular culture, in part because the industry and profession were still experiencing an identity crisis and remained unable to clearly articulate what they do and what they offer.

In response to these critics, Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) proposed three options toward (re)defining public

relations since its last definition in 1982 “public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other” (PRSA, n.d.). The winner was “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, n.d.; Table 1). While some scholars reported being “relatively happy with the new definition” (e.g., Rickey, 2012), others debated whether this definition clearly and correctly defined public relations (e.g., Dietrich, 2012).

In this article, we conduct a systematic literature review on recent scholarly efforts to define public relations. Munn et al. (2018) claimed that systematic reviews help to identify research gaps as well as trends in the current evidence, thereby underpinning and informing future research in the area. The current review aims to not only help scholars, organizational professionals, and the public to understand recent progress toward defining public relations, but also to identify trends and future directions in the research.

## Uncovering Trends through Systematic Review

In order to achieve a careful systematic review, we used a scholarly search engine specifically focused on the related field of the studies. We used “Communication Sources,” one of the nine recommended databases at the University library website. We searched for the records published between January 2000 and December 2023, using the search term “public relations definition” written in search boxes of journal title, abstract, and keywords. From the resulting response set, we filtered the articles down to “full text article, peer-reviewed, and Language:

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**Table 1.** PRSA's three proposed choices as the definition of public relations and voting results

| Choice to vote for | Public relations is...   | Voting result (%) |
|--------------------|--|-------------------|
| Definition #1:     | The management function of researching, communicating and collaborating with publics to build mutually beneficial relationships. | 341 votes (23.6)  |
| Definition #2:     | A strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.         | 671 votes (46.4)  |
| Definition #3:     | The strategic process of engagement between organizations and publics to achieve mutual understanding and realize goals.         | 435 votes (30.1)  |

Note. PRSA, Public Relations Society of America.

927 definitions were submitted to PRSA from Nov. 21, 2011 through Dec. 2, 2011 and three were chosen as finalists. Out of the 1,447 votes cast between Feb. 13, 2012 and Feb. 26, 2012, the winner was definition No. 2, according to Corbett (2012).

English.” This initial search yielded 34 articles. The initial list was then reduced upon screening titles, abstract, and keywords manually and removing duplicates.

We reviewed the final set of 28 articles in order to identify the introduction of term “public relations” and how the authors defined it. While all 28 articles included the focal construct—public relations—only a dozen articles clearly presented their operational definition of public relations, potentially including either PRSA's 1982 definition and/or PRSA's 2012 definition. After identifying and collecting these efforts in defining public relations, we analyzed them by looking for commonalities, points of difference, and in turn, by categorizing them according to findings of each. From our analysis, seven distinctive categorical trends emerged, which we describe below.

### Defining Public Relations by Understanding “Public” or “Relations” or Both

Four studies discussed the meaning and role of public relations by inspecting the term itself, specifically focusing on either “public” or “relations” or both. Kazoleas and Teven (2009) claimed the essential role of public relations is relational management, and thus the focus of public relations should be on the relationship between individuals, groups, and organizations as well as the communication behaviors that bind them. Accordingly, the core of public relations should be the belief that organizations must carefully monitor and manage their relationships with key stakeholders, and this relational management should generate trust as an important organizational outcome. Meanwhile, Kruckeberg and Vujnovic (2010) attempted to re-define public relations by defining “publics” which they intentionally expressed in a plural form. They asserted that “there is no general public; rather, everyone is a member of many definable, describable publics” (p. 118). In addition, they emphasized that, according to this notion of “public,” the costs of a public relations campaign would be significantly greater insofar as the campaign's messages would often be designed to include passive

publics and non-publics. Heath (2013) urged that researchers and practitioners should clarify whether the public relations of an organization “stands for an organization's simple and singular relationship with one public or “the” public—or many “publics” (p. 426).

### Defining Public Relations through Cross-Cultural Comparisons

A significant number of studies conducted outside of the U.S. contribute important understandings about the territorially unique characteristics of public relations (e.g., Norway: Brønn, 2014; New Zealand: Hobbs & Allen, 2023, Motion, 2001; Australia: Howell, 2002; Brazil: Molleda & Athaydes, 2003; Zimbabwe: Ngondo & Klyueva, 2020; the UK: Pieczka, 2002; 25 European countries: Verčič, van Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2001). Verčič et al. (2001) conducted in-depth interviews with participants from 25 European countries in order to clarify both descriptive and normative roles of public relations. Interestingly, the term public relations in English was used with a local term in the respondent's own language such as “Öffentlichkeitsarbeit” which in Germany means “public work” and is explained as “working in public, with the public and for the public” (Verčič et al., 2001, p. 376), in contrast to the mainstream understanding of public relations as relationship management. There is simply no adequate translation for the U.S. term public relations in other country cases as well, and the public relations defined itself as profession in transparent communication and symmetrical information sharing. Howell (2002) described characteristics of public relations in Australia such as more community-focused, not the corporate-wide big scale. Australian practices were guided by Public Relations Institute of Australia, which claimed to maintain higher ethical standards. Molleda and Athaydes (2003) observed the development of public relations profession, which must be licensed in Brazil, and interviewed registered professionals for the benefits and shortcomings of being licensed. The findings suggest that licensing public relations professionals legitimizes the profession, provides standards, promotes norma-

tive practices and enhances its reputation. Ngondo and Klyueva (2020) surveyed Zimbabwean public relations practitioners and reported notable discrepancies that most of tasks are performed as a technician at the micro level and engaged in disseminating materials such as news releases, fact sheets, and social media posts. Fundamentally, Zimbabwe is yet to develop formal public relations education programs.

### Defining Public Relations by Expanding the Scope of Public Relations

Several articles discussed public affairs, lobbying, corporate communications, crisis management, and/or issue management in defining public relations, extending the scope of the discipline. Myers (2018) urged the industry to be aware that the New York Joint Commission on Public Ethics created a broad lobbying regulation in 2016, requiring public relations practitioners to register as lobbyists in case they influence public attitude via the press and media. Similarly, Davidson (2015) described public affairs and lobbying as a high status and strategically vital public relations specialty. These two papers commonly argued that lobbying and public affairs are unique enough from public relations, but still belong within the discipline, emphasizing the importance of active dialogue with stakeholders in both legislation and public administration due to recent and rapid growth in interest group participation in policy making. Brønn (2014) surveyed how corporate communication was perceived by the business leaders in Norway. The respondents were confused with the role of public relations and often had marketing and sales functions responsible for communication including public relations. This study implied that public relations and corporate communication may not be distinguishable in practice, despite assumptions of their separateness by public relations professionals or communication executives. Jaques (2009) compared and contrasted crisis management and issue management, which were two specialty areas “under the rubric of public relations” (p. 280) with a growing convergence and overlap. He added that unlike definitional disputes within public relations, crisis management and issue management offered distinct research streams by taking a dual approach, both within public relations and apart from public relations simultaneously.

### Defining Public Relations by Exploring Subject-Specific Public Relations

Four studies explored public relations in various subject-relevant areas, including political public relations, international public relations, sports public relations, and electronic public relations. Hobbs and Allen (2023) qualitatively evaluated various message framing strategies via social media used by govern-

ment officials to persuade citizens to comply with the Covid-19 orders, connecting political public relations, leadership communication, and crisis communication. Accordingly, they offered a definition of political public relations as “a management process that discursively constructs a public persona and leadership. It provides guidance during a crisis, advocates for or against a policy, and connects citizens to the wrangle of ideas essential to a democracy” (p. 102326). Zaharna (2000) adopted the defined international public relations as “the planned and organized effort of a company, institution, or government to establish mutually beneficial relations with the publics of other nations” (Wilcox, Ault, & Agee, 1989, p. 395), separating from the general application of public relations and emphasizing its function in intercultural communication. Anderson (2003) asserted that sports public relations campaigns, such as Major League Baseball (MLB), saw inconsistent approaches in the use of public relations, making it unique from other types of organizations. He argued that MLB officials used public relations strategies to promote baseball as the national pastime long before the term “public relations” became widely used. Motion (2001) offered the term “electronic public relations” emphasizing the potential role of the Internet as a new arena of the public sphere. She described internet as a communication tool, marketplace, and public sphere, as internet offers opportunities in developing varied discourses, forming social and political identities, and encouraging different communities and interest groups to be formed.

### Defining Public Relations by Observing Specific Elements of Public Relations

Several scholars focused on elements of public relations such as engagement, ethics, and expectations, and tried to reveal the salient components of public relations. Dhanesh (2017) argued that engagement was a catchword within public relations practice due to increased digital engagement. Engagement was defined as “an affective, cognitive, and behavioral state wherein publics and organizations who share mutual interests in salient topics interact along continua that range from passive to active and from control to collaboration, and is aimed at goal attainment, adjustment, and adaptation for both publics and organizations” (Dhanesh, 2017, p. 931). Purcaru (2016) claimed that ethical communication was the foundation and principle for public relations, arguing that practitioners should not only apply intellectual knowledge in a line of work but also apply the ethical principles in every single professional act. Similarly, Messina (2007) introduced ethical persuasion as part of public relations, and propaganda was compared and contrasted to argue what ethical persuasion is and is not. The working definition of eth-

ical persuasion in public relations was proposed as “an attempt through communication to influence knowledge, attitude or behavior of an audience through presentation of a view that addresses and allows the audience to make voluntary, informed, rational and reflective judgments” (Messina, 2007, p. 33). Baker (2002) also highlighted that the basis of the profession was ethics and public trust, while Sharpe (2000) pointed out that honesty and openness were important as public relations was performed. Olkkonen and Luoma-Aho (2015) categorized eight different chunks of expectations in public relations in order to clarify the role of public relations. Reputation was the most often mentioned concept in relation to expectations, followed by responsibility and relationship. Understanding key expectations toward public relations and the importance of satisfying and managing them was demanded.

### Defining Public Relations by Examining Public Relations Expertise

Several articles discuss public relations in context to the qualifications and expertise of public relations professionals. Sharpe (2000) proposed that public relations is defined in terms of professional activities by PRSA, and argued that they be described as those necessary for the achievement and maintenance of effective public relationships. He agreed with Seitel (1998) that “public relations is the practice of doing the right thing” (p. 347). Baker (2002) tabulated essential characteristics of “Professionals” versus “Pros,” and proposed that public relations should move from the expertise perspective (e.g., practitioners of skilled occupations) and the contractual perspective (e.g., contract-based service providers who obey clients’ wills for a fee) to the Pledge-Based Model (Koehn, 1994). This covenantal model considered public relations “the profession worthy of public trust, the field must devote itself to a defined human good (relationships), and must be grounded in a public pledge to serve this good” (p. 191). Pieczka (2002) defined public relations expertise as “a body of practical knowledge which makes it possible for public relations practice to exist” (p. 302). Key areas of public relations expertise were noted (e.g., not only rational arguments, but emotional factors should be added). Berger (2002) found several critical qualities required to work as a practitioner on real-time merger communication issues. These qualities even included project scheduling, budget planning, and post-project assessments. Moss and Green (2001) suggested the manager role in public relations as “a composite role which embraced elements of expert prescription, problem-solving process facilitation and communications facilitation” (p. 119). Black and Härtel (2002) empirically tested a measurement scale of public relations orientation, which was “the ability of managers across

the organization to respond to information from the organization’s network of stakeholders” (p. 117). Myers (2016) found that the courts variously determined that public relations was not defined as just one type of communication, but instead they examined its content and purpose and interpreted it according to its functions. He also mentioned the legal license that mandated public relations practitioners register as lobbyists. These regulations and court cases highlight the legal qualifications and responsibilities of public relations professionals.

### Defining Public Relations through Theorists’ Lens on Public Relations

There are two studies written with the theorists’ perspective, while several studies applied theories including stakeholder theory and rhetorical theory (e.g., Davidson, 2015; Sarpe, 2002). Holtzhausen (2000) criticized that traditional public relations practices pursued consensus and symmetry and narrowly defined its role as organizational communication management. She suggested an application of postmodern analysis to public relations and stressed that “public relations can contribute to grassroots democracy through activism and radical politics” (p. 93). Due to the diversity of human experience and multiplicity of perspectives, postmodern public relations practitioners were encouraged to be activists within organizations, looking beyond the technical and practical environment. L’Etang (2005) summarized the implications of public relations research using critical theory as a foundation. She mentioned that through more open approaches some critical public relations scholars reoriented their research away from the U.S. toward other cultures and histories and others ventured a merging with media sociology in public relations studies. She objected to treat employees as single public, and admitted that there were always multiple perspectives at any point in time even within an organization. Both studies offered an opportunity to understand public relations from different perspectives, especially beyond functionalist concerns.

## Conclusion

We identified research trends in defining public relations carried out for last 23 years. While we recognize PRSA’s efforts to provide a legitimate definition of public relations, we confirm the multi-disciplinary nature of public relations in this study. By discovering seven categorical movements in defining public relations, we invite scholars to clarify multi-specializations within public relations, investigate diverse features and phenomena in a more in-depth fashion, and increase our descriptive and normative understanding of public relations (e.g., “What is public relations?” and “What ought to be public relations?”).

This study is not without its limitations as we reviewed a small set of published articles. Overall, this study is exploratory in nature, adding a small but important contribution to the existing knowledge base in public relations.

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