

The McMaster Journal of
Communication
Volume 6, Issue 1
2009
Article 2

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Relations/Communications Management
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Terence Flynn & Alexandre Sévigny

Abstract

The authors describe the history of the study of public relations/communication management in Canada. Focus is placed on the lack of empirical research concerning the function and practice of professional communication in Canada. The authors also discuss the dangers this lack of evidence poses to the constructing of an effective critical literature surrounding the social, cultural and economic impact that public relations/communication management is having in Canada. The authors draw comparisons to three other fields: journalism, communication studies and cultural studies, all of which have faced a similar evolution emerging from practice to theory. Finally, the authors discuss innovative new undergraduate and graduate programs developed at McMaster to address the dearth of empirical investigation of public relations/communication management in Canada.

The McMaster Journal of Communication
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Volume 6, Issue 1 ISSN 1710-257X

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For more than 60 years public relations courses have been taught in a select number of Canadian universities and colleges to educate interested students on the skills and management perspectives of this growing business function (Canadian Public Relations Society, 2010). However, the establishment of the first university degree program in public relations in English Canada did not take place until the early 1980s (Mount St. Vincent University, 2010) and since that time only four other degree and 12 college diploma programs have been established (Canadian Public Relations Society, 2010). The majority of these programs have focused on teaching communications and public relations theory as well as the technical skills necessary for graduates to achieve employment in the field.

While these programs have been designed to meet the professional needs of the industry, there has been limited research and theory-building conducted on the practice of public relations in Canada. A literature search on the practice yielded only a handful of empirical studies on the profession and its members. It was only recently that a perspective on the evolution of the practice in Canada was published in a handbook on global public relations (Krishnamurthy and Vercic, 2009, and Likely, 2009.)

Without a clearly defined body of knowledge, the practice of public relations/communications management in Canada can only be seen as a semi-profession, as stated by Johansen,(2001): “exhibiting elements of professionalization” (55). At the undergraduate level, institutions such as Mount Saint Vincent University have realized this weakness and begun to re-orient their programs toward a broader communications orientation, rather than simply focusing on the technical skills required to practice public relations. Nevertheless, even these efforts remain hampered by a lack of scholarly research in the area. To build that theoretical and professional body of knowledge, the practice has called upon graduate level education to study, reflect on, and critique the current practices of the profession. However, until recently there have been no masters-level programs in public relations or communications management in place at any university in Canada. Much like the study of public relations in Canada, little has been written on the development of graduate-level public relations programs. Shen and Toth (2008) conducted a study to understand the profession’s expectations of an ideal cross-disciplinary graduate curriculum based on previous research (DiStaso, Stacks and Botan 2009, Hon, Fitzpatrick and Hall 2004, and Aldoory and Toth, 2000.)

The development of three graduate public relations programs – the Master of Communications Management degree program at the DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University and the

Master of Public Relations and the Master of Arts in Public Relations at Mount St. Vincent University -- have been designed to extend both the theoretical frameworks and professional perspectives of the practice, and as a result, expand the body of knowledge on the specific fields of public relations and communications management in Canada. With these programs in place, the first students producing original graduate-level research will now be seeking outlets for their scholarship.

From research on crisis management, to corporate reputation, to management perspectives about the field, to the development of new theories and areas of practice, the fields of public relations and communications management is ripe for scholarship and study. Building on the more than 50 years of empirical research that have been conducted in the United States and Europe, Canadian public relations scholars will have the opportunity to help define the practice and the profession.

The development of public relations and communications management as a well-defined field of study has many parallels in other academic fields that have professionalized recently. Let us consider the examples of journalism, cultural studies and communication studies. Journalism, immediately following World War II, was a career populated by practitioners from a diversity of perspectives. There was no standardized system of education or training – often reporters were trained on-the-job. The 1960s and 70s saw the development of many journalism and journalism studies programs across the United States and Canada. The rapid development of a body of empirical and critical literature on the practices and meanings of journalistic practice, including commentary on the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of the profession, translated into flourishing undergraduate and graduate programs. With the professionalization of journalism, an undergraduate or graduate degree in journalism became the ticket to finding employment opportunities. These university-trained practitioners began to discuss theoretical questions concerning rising consumerism, popular culture, news and current affairs – questions generated by the mass media revolution of the 20th century (Lasch, 1995).

Two sister disciplines grew up around the rapid development of journalism as a field: cultural studies and communication studies. Communication studies exploded in popularity and interest after WWII, as the West tried to understand how the rise of propaganda had contributed to the power and mass mobilization of National Socialist Germany. Critical cultural studies developed as a reaction to the strongly empirical and positivist approaches taken in American communication studies early on. It focused on how media texts distribute power across the class structure and how relationships of oppression and domination can be righted through language and journalistic practices and public relations. Cultural studies adopted a more social constructionist approach to issues of truth in research. The field of cultural studies was openly critical in its approach to knowledge, that is, critical-cultural researchers “took sides” by adopting as a major motive of their research the emancipation of people suffering from oppression. The British tradition in communication research was strongly marked by the rise of critical-cultural approaches.

Most communication research in the United States was solidly empirical, using a combination of the tools of the social sciences, social psychology, linguistics and literary studies to analyze human communication in interpersonal and mass settings. As mentioned, the British tradition was highly theoretical and critical. In Canada, the field of communication studies emerged very differently, due to the strong foundational influence of scholars such as Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis, both of whom conducted research from a critical perspective. Savage (2007) states that the Canadian tradition “combines the critical, theoretical understanding derived from the European tradition with a pragmatic, empirical approach typical of the American tradition” (513). This has meant that Canadian researchers use a blend of qualitative and quantitative research tools and approaches. Sévigny and Humphreys (2007), discuss how this blend could be extended through collaborations with researchers in the cognitive sciences.

Building such a body of empirical evidence around Canadian communication is becoming a priority. Interviews with communication scholars as well as journalists and other media leaders, policy-makers and professional communicators in 2006 found evidence that the lack of empirical measurement or “a grounded approach” threatens the Canadian critical media tradition of scholarship linked to media reform (Savage, 2008). One of the largest-ever sets of in-depth interviews of academics and practitioners in communication research revealed that the lack of available data gathered through ongoing evidence-based research is imperiling the integrity (and certainly the value to actual research users) of Canadian communication scholarship. Interviews were conducted with leaders of major media organizations (e.g. Globe and Mail, CBC community media, etc.), policy-makers (e.g. in Parliament, at the Canadian Radio-Television Telecommunications Commission, Canadian Heritage, consultants, and Non-Governmental Organizations), professional researchers (e.g. Michael Adams at Environics Research) and senior researcher activists (e.g. Michael Geist at the University of Ottawa.)

The practice of public relations is not new. It has actually been with us since ancient times. For instance, Jacques Ellul (1957) explains in *Histoire de la propagande*, that the religious centre of Delphi (11-12), in ancient Greece, made effective use of poetry, festivals, legends, and Delphic-inspired laws, as well as sloganeering to garner prestige and influence. The Macedonians applied a systematic program of propaganda, focused on building relationships with opinion leaders in Athens to prepare for Philip of Macedon’s conquest of Athens in 338 B.C. (13). Persuasion and the building of familiarity and relationships continued in Rome (17-34), died out temporarily through the Middle Ages (34), and then returned, as an object of study, in *The Prince*, by Niccolò Machiavelli (1980). During the Reformation (Edwards, 1942) and the French revolution (Leith, 1959), persuasion through pamphleteering was central to the battle for people’s hearts and minds. During WWI, the Deutsch-Amerika Bund competed to garner favour among German-speaking Americans through the mediums of storytelling, film, public speaking and pamphleteering (Black, 2003:331).

Edward T. Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, and Walter Lippman, a Pulitzer Prize winning columnist and founder of *The New Republic* magazine, both participated in George Creel’s Committee for Public Information during WWI. Lippman is famous for coining the term “manufacture of consent.” They both had an elitist perspective, thinking that the public is generally too simple to understand the great issues of the time and should be ruled by a class of experts. Bernays (1928) in his greatest work, *Propaganda* writes the following: “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society” (1). Since these words, there has been a tradition of critical work on propaganda – in fact Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988) used a version of Lippman’s phrase to title their famous book on American propaganda, *Manufacturing Consent*. Although Lippman and Bernays’ work was almost entirely critical and qualitative in its methodological approach, much American critical work, of which Chomsky’s voluminous œuvre is an example, has been the result of critical scholars meticulously poring over reams of available empirical data, collected by administrative communication researchers. It is important to note that their work could not have been accomplished without the availability of a large pool of data and analyses on public relations practice and the effects of persuasion. In Canada, this body of empirical research is almost completely lacking. As such, the Canadian critical literature on public relations has been sparse.

As the field of public relations attempts to define itself and gain legitimacy and respect in the academic world, it faces the same challenges as journalism, cultural studies and communications did when they began. Colleagues sometimes challenge the legitimacy of the field, questioning the legitimacy of the types of foundational and definitional work that mark a field in its initial phases of development. Cultural studies was considered flimsy because of its basis in political engagement;

communications was often dismissed as the study of media-based ephemera; and journalism struggled early on with the impression that it was nothing but a glorified trade or craft.

We have now entered a world of 24/7 news media, omnipresent popular culture and social media delivered straight to our smartphones. Communication, journalism and cultural studies have grown in both prominence and perceived importance in the eyes of both academic and general publics. Public relations is the profession that brings all of these things together – it is the profession of relationship building, engaging stakeholders to find win/win solutions and facilitating open and honest communication. Providing an education in public relations theory and practice will be one of the pillars of public literacy in the decades to come. Given the often unfortunate but spectacular successes of past efforts in propaganda and opinion manipulation, we simply cannot afford to remain blind to the critical need to understand the ways in which relationships are built through the various forms of communication.

An accident of history meant that McMaster University became a gathering place for researchers interested in both theoretical and applied studies in communication and public relations. The various communications programs founded at McMaster, starting in 2001, gave equal weight to both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches to communication and public relations. Methods are taught systematically in an attempt to give students a well-rounded education that will help them to be effective practitioners as well as critically engaged citizens. The founding and development of programs in the Faculty of Humanities: a Communication Studies honours bachelor's degree in 2001 and a Master of Communication and New Media in 2009, have been steps in the development of a solid platform for blended critical-empirical education and research in communications and public relations in Canada. The founding of the Master of Communications Management at the DeGroote School of Business in 2007 saw the emergence of a flagship program that brings the top practitioners from across Canada to campus to study public relations from theoretical, commercial and technical perspectives.

With this special edition of the McMaster Journal of Communication, seven graduate students in the DeGroote School of Business, Masters of Communications Management degree program present their original research on specific areas of the practice. Each of these studies explores a unique dimension, perspective or theory that helps to foster a better understanding of the field in Canada. Each author has engaged in his or her own empirical journey to arrive at the findings they present in this journal. Some have extended previously published studies while others have chosen to create and discuss their own new theories of communications. Some have explored how public relations functions in a specific setting while others have sought to test how institutions and sectors have applied theory to practice.

According to Flynn (2006) there is much to study in this growing field, as the academy and the profession seek to understand the multi-dimensional pressures that organizations are facing in order to build mutually beneficial relationships with their key stakeholders. It is from this perspective that these contributions are now offered.

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