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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CONTINUES TO BE STRONGLY INSTRUMENTAL: RESULTS OF A LONG-TERM STUDY OF PR PRACTICES IN AUSTRIA

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Abstract: Over the last four decades, the PR industry tried hard to develop from an operational practice into a full strategic management function. Analyzing the submissions for the Austrian-PR-State-Award (1984-2020) shows no significant changes in the perception and treatment of PR problems in this period. A symbolic-interpretive mode is more often practiced than a dialogue-oriented management mode. The main focus is on gaining internal influence, and improving the actual performance is neglected. Hence, due to this imbalance, the possibility of professionalization efforts through a mutually reinforcing dynamic of increase between performance and influence cannot be fully exploited.

Keywords: Public Relations, Communication Management, Professionalization, Austrian State Award for Public Relations

Problem

Observing the industry over the last decades, it is striking that PR tries to professionalize in different ways but seems stuck in this process. Still, PR suffers a bad reputation in public, of which PR professionals are quite aware, as exemplified by the fact that 52.4% of PR practitioners across Europe complain about the "[p]oor reputation of professional communication and PR in society" (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2012, p. 38). This dubious image of public relations goes hand in hand with a general impression that depicts prototypical representatives of the field as friendly, smiling, but naive "PR-ladies" or so-called "earls-of-sandwiches" on one side and the other side as reckless and sneaky spin doctors of public opinion. You might have to accept this negative public image when your first aim is to hone the interest of your own company.

In addition to facing a devastating reputation, PR departments also experience a challenging position as a functional area within their own organization: “A large majority of the respondents state (…) a lack of understanding of communication practice within the top management (84%) and difficulties of the profession itself to prove the impact of communication activities on organisational goals (75%)” (Zerfass et al., 2012, p. 37). Again in 2022, Linking Business Strategy and Communication continues to be one of the most urgent issues over the years (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Buhmann, 2022, p. 74). Additionally, Röttger emphasizes that PR has a, “lack of problem-solving competence”, which leads to empirically verifiable “encroachment effects” (2010, p. 21, translated by authors). This means that managers from outside the field (e.g., lawyers or engineers) are often more likely to be entrusted with the execution of PR tasks than trained PR managers (Dees & Döbler, 1997; Dozier, 1988; Nothhaft, 2011; Röttger, 2010; Wienand, 2003).
These impressions and their effects are fatal for a relatively young industry like PR and provide the framework for this study. The goal is to shed more light on how PR practitioners deal with communication issues and what accents have been set in the past to solve these problems better, i.e., more professionally.

Theoretical Foundation

Three main strategies point out how the PR industry deals with those challenges:
1. *Semantic positioning:* Academics, PR, and communication professionals, professional associations, agencies, and consultants are constantly trying to redefine the function mainly via coming up with different labels that should help to broaden the field and expand the area of responsibility (Dietrich, 2018, 10 et sqq.). Grunig and Hunt set the most common definition when stating, “Public relations [...] is the management of communication between an organization and its publics (1984, p. 8); From thereon, terms such as Communication Management, Integrated Communication, Organizational Communication, and Corporate Communication, came up and as the latest example the discussion of the branch circulates around the label Strategic Communication.

2. *Gain internal influence:* PR is striving to be recognized as a management function and is trying “to unlock the boardroom“ (Bütschi & Steyn, 2006, p. 108) and get access to the C-Suite (Nothhaft, 2011, p. 212) or Dominant Coalition (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, 120 et seq.). This Management-Shift (Wehmeier, 2008) is driven by the idea of positioning the PR department as an essential function of organizations and playing a more substantial role in the internal Management Game (Simcic Brønn, Romenti, & Zerfass, 2016) to gain more influence on superior corporate strategy decisions.

3. *Improve actual performance:* PR work on their actual performance of what is done and which results can be expected. In other words, improving the primary mode of PR, in terms of delimited problems which PR is responsible for, strategies for coping with those problems, and actual measures realized when PR comes into play.

All three strategies try to pave the main path PR tries to walk to develop as a profession: “For decades now, communication management and public relations is transforming itself from an operational practice of preparing, producing, and disseminating communication materials into a full strategic management function, which includes speaking as well as listening, consulting as well as executing.” (Zerfass et al., 2012, p. 43).

According to the general objection on fashion in management (Kieser, 1997), the first mentioned strategy (semantic positioning) is unsuitable for substantial changes, as numerous authors have rejected these initiatives of redefining PR via finding new labels. Theis-Berglmair (2013) argues for sticking to Public Relations as all communicative activities are subsumed sufficiently. And Röttger et al. too prefer the term Public Relations as it still suits all challenges

of the communication industry best. They define Public Relations as, "all managed internal and external communication to support the organization's interests and help to gain public legitimacy" (2018, p. 7, transl. by authors).

The second strategy (gaining internal influence) and third (improving actual performance) are theoretically founded much better and broader. They are dominating the discussion of the practical field over the last decades: "The profession is striving for a strategic position at the decision-making table to become a part of the strategic management of an organisation (…)." (Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2014, p. 83). The whole Grunig-Paradigm (Macnamara, 2012, p. 367) is to be subsumed with the term Management-Shift (Dees & Döbler, 1997; Raupp & Klewes, 2004; Wehmeier, 2008) and shall be discussed in more detail in the following.

Excellent PR – The Grunig paradigm

Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 22) first distinguished four different models of public relations: Publicity, Public Information, Two-Way-Asymmetrical, and Two-Way Symmetrical (Table 1).

Table 1: *Characteristics of Four Models of Public Relations – own presentation based on Grunig & Hunt (1984, p. 22)*

	Model			
Characteristic	**Publicity**	**Public Information**	**Two-Way-Asymmetric**	**Two-Way-Symmetric**
Purpose	Propaganda	Dissemination of Information	Scientific persuasion	Mutual understanding
Nature of Communication	One-way; complete truth not essential	One-way; truth important	Two-way; imbalanced effects	Two-way; balanced effects
Communication Model	Source -> Receiver	Source -> Receiver	Source <-> Receiver (Feedback)	Group <-> Group

In the context of the famous Excellence Studies (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), those four models were subsumed in two different modes or approaches of practicing public relations: symbolic-interpretative and strategic management paradigm. Symbolic-interpretative-oriented Communication believes in PR as a buffering function. The main goal is to influence the publics and gain interpretative sovereignty over important topics, issues, and images. "Such organizations believe favorable impressions created by public relations can obscure their decisions and actions and, in turn, that they can behave in the way that managers with power want without interference from publics." (Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang, & Grunig, 2013, p. 201). PR, based on a strategic management approach, on the other hand, is conceptualized as a boundary spanner or bridging function. It strives to create opportunities and platforms for exchange, collaboration, and Co-Creation to enable win-win situations where all stakeholders benefit. PR departments claiming to be a bridging function, need to have access to the C-Suite (Bütschi & Steyn, 2006, p. 108; Nothhaft, 2011, p. 212) to be able to proactively shape the strategy of the whole organization rather than acting like an announcer who transports messages from the organization to the public and ensures that the public receives and accepts the organization's positions.

Grunig states that PR, of course, is realized in all four models and both of the two approaches. Still, he points out that excellent PR departments more often focus on a management approach: "The Excellence study concluded, therefore, that public relations makes an organization more effective when it identifies the most strategic publics of the organization as part of strategic management processes and conducts communication programs to cultivate effective long-term relationships with those publics (Kim et al., 2013, p. 200).

Excellent PR - revisited

Zerfass and colleagues have taken the discussion around excellence in Public Relations further and developed the Comparative Excellence Framework (Zerfass, Verhoeven, Moreno, Tench, & Verčič, 2016), which allows identifying excellent PR departments on the following characteristics: "Excellence is conceptually based on the internal standing of the communication department within the organisation (influence) and external results of the communication department's activities as well as its basic qualifications (performance)." (Zerfass et al., 2022, p. 89) This is based on the variables of advisory and executive influence as well as success and competence (Table 2). Excellent departments must achieve maximum values (6-7) in all four dimensions. (Zerfass, Buhmann, Tench, Verčič, & Moreno, 2021, 85 et seq.) It is striking that the departments in the area of influence (22.5% and 22.7%, respectively have the maximum value of 7) perform significantly better than in the area of performance (only 9.8% and 11.0% respectively achieve the total value of 7). This ratio has been relatively constant over the years.

Table 2: *Excellent communication departments 2022 (Zerfass et al., 2022, p. 91, own presentation)*

		no manifestation (1) - strong manifestation (7)						
		1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Influence	Advisory Influence	< 3%	4.5%	5.6%	10.7%	23.6%	31.7%	**22.5%**
	Executive Influence	< 3%	4.8%	5.8%	11.6%	19.1%	34.0%	**22.7%**
Performance	Success	< 3%	4.1%	7.0%	17.1%	31.7%	28.9%	**9.8%**
	Competence	< 3%	3.5%	6.8%	18.6%	29.7%	29.3%	**11.0%**

The Comparative Excellence Framework (Zerfass et al., 2016, p. 109) makes it clear that the orthodox discourse on professionalization must be conducted on two levels: on the one hand, the performance of the PR department, and, on the other, its internal influence. The results of the European Communication Monitor show, however, that the PR industry is concentrating its professionalization efforts rather one-sidedly on increasing management skills to increase its influence in shaping organizational policy. Investments in communication-specific know-how or implementation skills (Szyszka, 1995) to achieve a higher level of performance are made to a much lesser extent. The perceived disadvantages in the internal management game are to be compensated by higher management skills.

Dietrich (2018) came up with the idea to conceive professional PR as a medal whose two sides of influence and performance affect each other mutually: High influence in the dominant coalition enables PR to help shape corporate strategy. This can create conditions and frameworks that facilitate higher communicative performance. This undoubtedly requires skillful acting in the internal management game. At the same time, however, corresponding performance (i.e., a high level of communicative problem-solving competence; i.e., performance) is a central prerequisite for increasing trust in the PR function and, in turn, for

increasing influence. A mutually reinforcing dynamic of increase between performance and influence cannot be fully exploited in this unbalanced approach.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

To gain insights in more detail on the performance side of PR, we will present and discuss empirical data in the next step. The study aims to determine the status quo of PR practice empirically and which professionalization developments can be identified. The research questions were: (1) How can PR work - rated as excellent by the PR professionals themselves - be described in the central dimensions? (Analyzing the submissions to the Austrian State Award for Public Relations provides the unique opportunity to examine material the submitters have classified as outstanding and thus worthy of the State Award.) And, (2) What professionalization trends and developments can be perceived in Austrian PR practice between 1984 and 2020?

Research Design

The primary object of investigation is submissions to the Austrian State Award for Public Relations between 1984 and 2020. The primary approach follows an exegetical character insofar as not the stated aims are investigated, but rather the overall setup and themes are explored. The reconstruction of problems, goals, and strategic as well as tactical procedures in projects, which the actors involved consider excellent examples of their work, should enable more profound insights into the mode of PR practice. (A critical reflection on the limitations of the methodological approach can be found at the end of the article.)

Description of Data Set

The Austrian State Award for Public Relations was initiated for projects implemented between the 1st of January 1984 and the 30th of June 1985. Since this time, the award has been given out annually. The Austrian Association for Public Relations (PRVA) granted exclusive access to the project documents submitted from inception until 2020. Unfortunately, no submissions from 1988 to 1999 are archived in the PRVA office and, therefore, could not be included in the analysis. The data corpus, thus, comprises the sum of 1,030 submissions in the period from 1984 to 1987 and from 2000 to 2020.

This considerable period enables the investigation of trends and developments in different periods based on the same underlying variables.

The annual data are aggregated into higher-order clusters to increase the number of observations and improve the identification of patterns (although the submissions from 1988 to 1999 could not be included). Two types of clusters are formed: Cluster 1 includes three four-year categories starting with the initial period, whereas Cluster 2 accounts for five and six-year periods from 2000 until 2020. In this way, Cluster 1 is designed to provide information on long-term changes, while Cluster 2 allows tracking current developments throughout the last twenty years on a seamless base.

Table 3: *Number of Project Submissions for Austrian State Award for Public Relations in Cluster 1 and Cluster 2 Categories*

Cluster Type	Categories	Observations	Overall
Cluster 1	1984-1987	71	436
	2000-2003	95	
	2017-2020	270	
Cluster 2	2000-2005	145	937
	2006-2010	191	
	2011-2015	281	
	2016-2020	320	

Table 3 provides an overview of the two cluster types and their categories. Cluster 1 splits the overall period into three sub-categories that can be analyzed as markers in time. Cluster 2 displays a more fine-grained picture of essential developments by zooming into the last twenty years. Due to its concentration in the most numerous sample years, the second cluster type contains more than twice as many observations compared to the first and, therefore, may serve to highlight important trends throughout the underlying two decades.

Conceptual Content Analysis

Based on the indicated project submission, a conceptual concept analysis is implemented to classify important characteristics (Mayring, 2010, p. 24). As a rule, this type of analysis structures formal aspects and content-related characteristics of the investigation material. In principle, it can be assigned to qualitative social research. However, it is regarded as a prime example of overcoming the contradiction between quantitative and qualitative research in that both methods are closely intertwined.

Gläser and Laudel (2010, p. 197) indicate the following steps for content analysis:

- • Creation of a closed categorical system in preparation for the analysis
- • Splitting up of text in elements of analysis
- • Investigation of text for relevant information
- • Assignment of information to predefined categories (coding)

All submitted documents exhibit a similar structure: (1) Starting point / Definition of problem, (2) Target groups for dialogue, (3) Definition of objectives, (4) Formulation of strategy, (5) Selected measures, and (6) Evaluation. Based on this setup, the categories can be retrieved in the respective chapters. A variable such as Problems & Objectives of the Organization can be gleaned from the first chapter on problem definition. The individual categories of this variable are formulated based on the approach by Eisenegger and Imhof (2009) that proposes a classification into functional-factual, social-moral, and expressive organizational problem statements.

Frequency Analysis

The Austrian State Award for Public Relations submissions often contain formulations that do not allow a clear assignment of the described strategic or tactical procedures in the individual concepts. This can be seen, for example, in the abundance of dialogue groups or stakeholders that are addressed in each case, in a wide range of goals that are to be achieved using the respective PR project, and a generally broad bundle of measures that are implemented using a large number of instruments in different combinations is implemented.

When analyzing the submissions for the Austrian State Award for Public Relations, itis noticeable, among other things, that possible communication modes are used, such as types of media (one-way, two-way, social media, and events). Furthermore, projects are often implemented via a mix of owned, paid, and earned media. And, of course, no organization focuses and reduces its direction of impact to purely inbound or outbound.

The consequence is that in major categories, the respective item characteristics cannot be assigned exclusively and selectively since quantifications in the sense of a distribution or a

ranking are difficult to objectify with the naked eye. As a result, these categories would lose their ability to discriminate, and the entire analysis would lose its meaningfulness due to the coding. For this reason, an IT-supported frequency analysis was used. It makes general tendencies in PR practice visible across all concepts by assuming a connection between the number of terms and content mentioned and their meaning in the specific context – in this case, the planning and implementation of PR projects (for the foundation and methodological discussion of this approach, see Titscher, Wodak, Meyer, & Vetter, 1998, 80 et seq.). By compressing the PR-relevant terminology into a manageable number of meta-labels generated from the material, a relation of different strategic and tactical approaches or dispositions of the PR actors can be read.

Table 4 provides an overview of the variables and their categories generated based on conceptual content and frequency analysis.

Table 4: *Description of Selected Variables and Formulated Categories for Implementation of Conceptual Content Analysis*

Variable	Categories	Analysis
Dialogue Groups & Stakeholders	internal	Conceptual Content Analysis
	external	
	internal & external	
Organizational Problem & Objectives	functional-factual	Conceptual Content Analysis
	social-moral	
	expressive	
Organizational Policy	unchanged organization/product	Conceptual Content Analysis
	changed organization/ product	
	new organization/product	
Main Trigger of Problems	internal	Conceptual Content Analysis
	external	
Direction of Impact	inbound	Frequency Analysis
	outbound	
	inbound & outbound	
Communication Mode	one-way	Frequency Analysis
	two-way	
	Social Media	
	Event	
Types of Media	earned media	Frequency Analysis
	paid media	
	owned media	

Empirical Results

The first thing that stands out is that the composition of the dialog groups has changed massively (highly significant). The distinction was made between internal and external dialog groups. Whereas at the beginning of the study period, more than four-fifths of the stakeholders were exclusively external, this proportion has fallen to around half over the years (see Figure 1). On the one hand, there has been a slight increase in the number of projects focused purely on an internal target group. Still, on the other hand, there have been simultaneous considerations of both external and internal stakeholders. This shows that the importance of internal groups has increased to a highly significant degree. Even if a PR project is primarily externally oriented, the internal workforce is involved and at least informed about these activities.

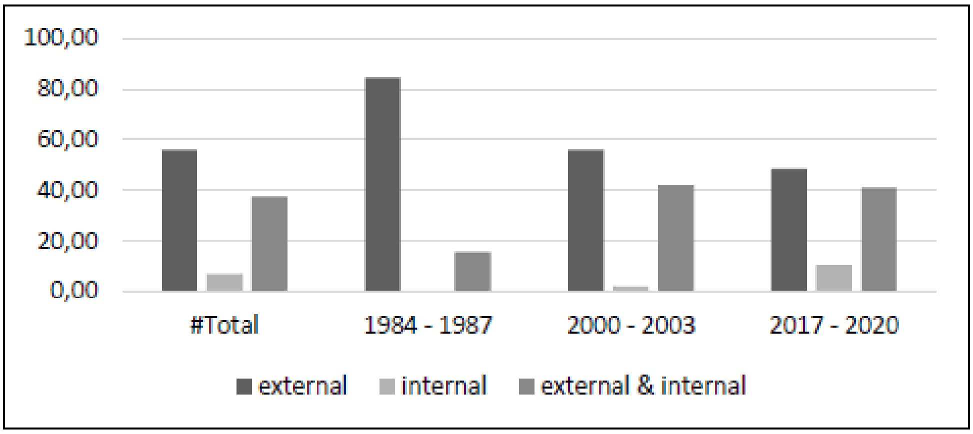

Figure 1: *Addressed Dialog Groups and Stakeholders (Cluster 1: 1984-2020)*

A closer look at the development over the last 20 years (Cluster 2) confirms this trend that internal dialog groups are gaining importance. Only slight fluctuations in the distribution are discernible (see Figure 2).

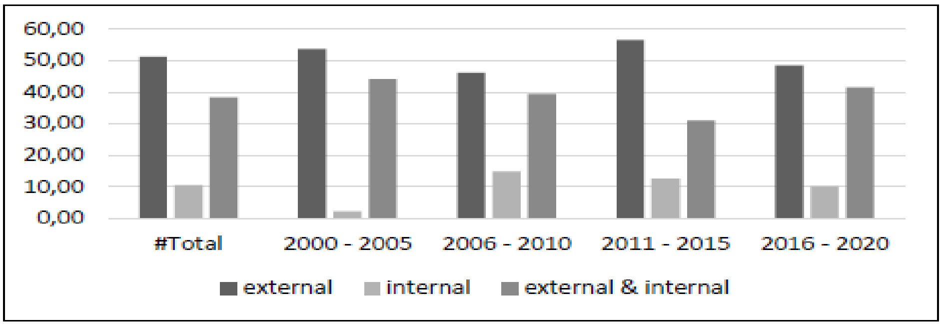

Figure 2: *Addressed Dialog Groups and Stakeholders (Cluster 2: 2000-2020)*

Presenting the next results, we follow Eisenegger and Imhoff's distinction (2009) by differing organizational problems with functional-factual, social-moral, and expressive orientations. It can be seen that most of the projects (54.36%) in Cluster 1 (see Figure 3) were expressive. The percentage of functional-factual-oriented projects increased slightly, whereas the social-moral orientation decreased slightly (all changes are in a non-significant range).

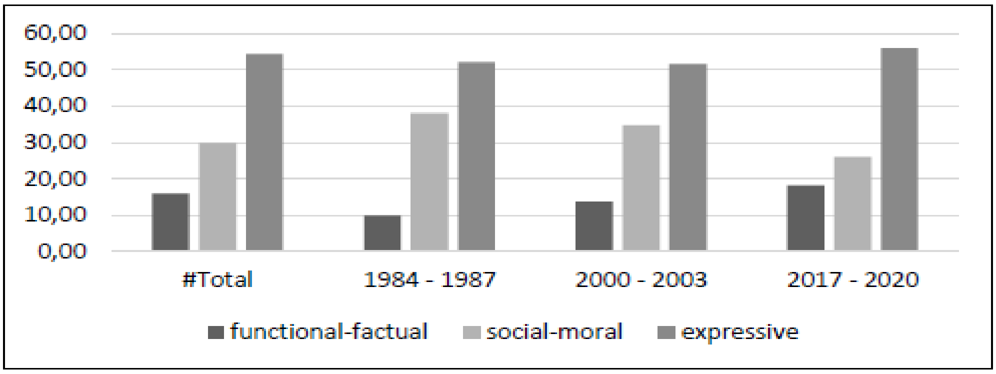

Figure 3: Problems & Objectives of the Organization (Cluster 1: 1984-2020)

The evaluation of Cluster 2 (see Figure 4) over the last 20 years shows a similar picture: Overall, 46.64% of the projects were expressive in nature, and the other dimensions, functional-factual (23.91%) and social-moral (29.46%) are significantly underrepresented. It is striking that the expressive orientation – after a downturn between 2006 to 2015 – has once again clearly (and significantly) gained importance in the last five years.

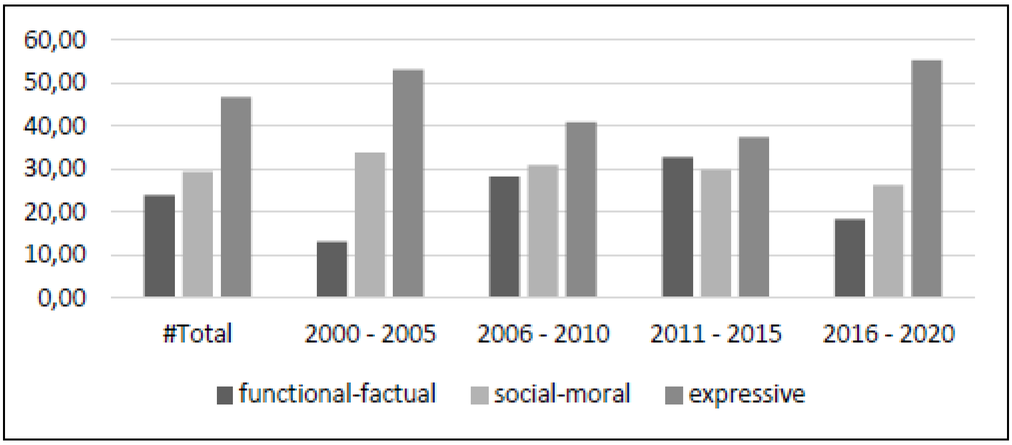

Figure 4: *Problems & Objectives of the Organization (Cluster 2: 2000-2020)*

This can mean that PR acts with a massive orientation to expressive problems via reference variables, such as increasing awareness, sympathy, trust, and image, and strives for potentials concerning central positioning characteristics. Functional and factual problems (e.g., quality, innovation, business processes, etc.) and social and moral problems (e.g., assumption of responsibility, social orientation, etc.) remain underrepresented, even over time.

Considering, together with the results, that the dominant organizational policy usually does not generate any news value whatsoever, the staging and expressive presentation of the organization's positions and qualities can be better understood as the decisive goal of PR activities. In 82.03% of the projects, the organization or the organization's products remain unchanged, and in just roundabout 10% each, the PR project serves to communicate a new or changed company or product. These characteristics are unchanged in magnitude and distribution over time in Cluster 1 and Cluster 2. The results are, therefore, only shown with a graph from Cluster 1 (see Figure 5).

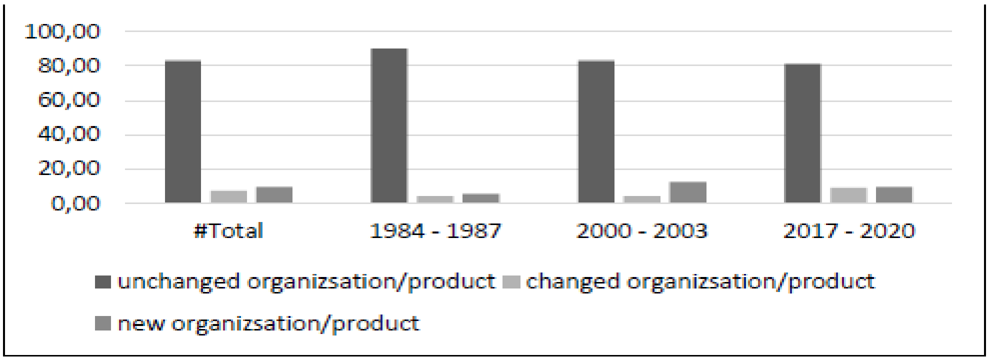

Figure 5: *Organizational Policy (Cluster 1: 1984-2020)*

Over the entire analysis period, 58.94% of the PR initiatives start within the organization itself, i.e., internally. In other words, in almost two-thirds of all cases, the PR project is launched without any explicit reference to external developments or any discernible direct pressure from environmental developments. Conversely, 41.06% of PR projects can be classified as reactions to the environment (externally). Here, companies react to external expectations that were either directly addressed to them (e.g., crisis, registering claims of specific stakeholders) or to general expectations, trends, and problems of the environment (e.g., general sustainability trend, gender gap ...). Again, the same results emerge when looking at the period in Cluster 2. The slight fluctuations in the results are in a non-significant range in each case (see Figure 6).

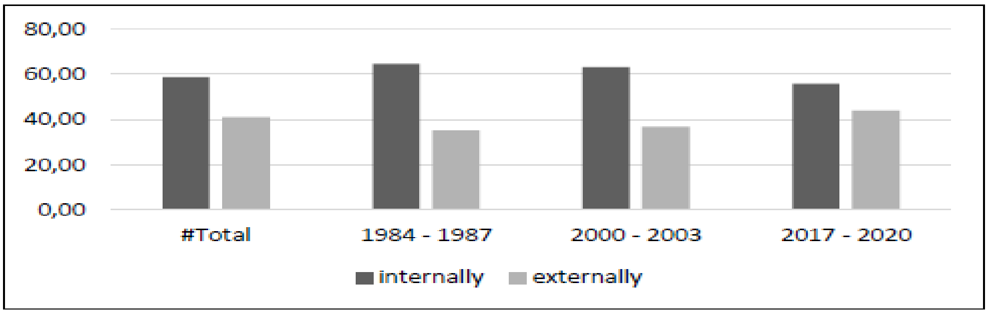

Figure 6: *Main Trigger of Problems (Cluster 1: 1984-2020)*

This finding, in combination with the results of the organizational policy PR projects are based on, presented above, can be seen as a strong indicator that PR is more internally focused and less externally oriented - an approach that suggests an understanding of PR as a buffering function rather than as a bridging function.

This impression strengthens when looking at the dominant direction of action. As an outcome of our frequency analysis, we identified the direction of impact, which PR professionals mainly rely on. Management is effective in two directions: On the one hand, organizations try to exert an intentional influence on the environment (outbound); on the other hand, organizations carry out adaptive activities to adjust to changing requirements of the environment (inbound). Our results show that in both Clusters, exemplified between 2000 to 2020 (Cluster 2), inbound-orientated activities only come into play to the extent of 6.6%. Outbound orientation is the dominant mode of PR, as 62.3% of all activities focus on this approach exclusively, and the rest 31.1% cover both directions (inbound and outbound). The development over the years shows that outbound is decreasing slightly but still is the first choice by far (see Figure 7).

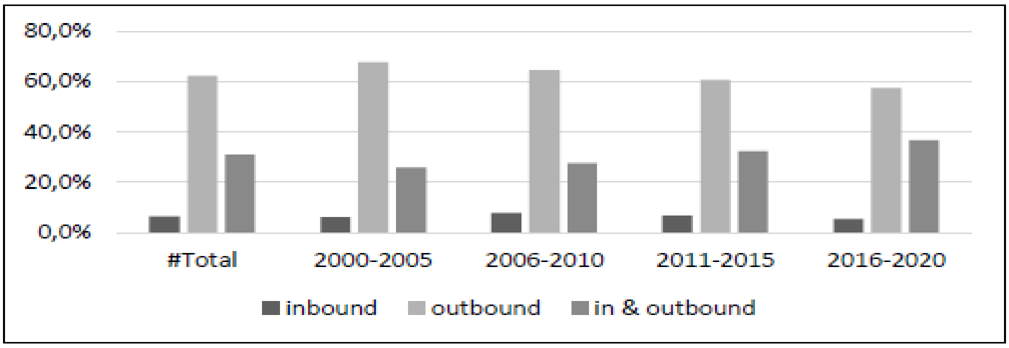

Figure 7: *Direction of Impact (Cluster 2: 2000-2020)*

The following variable shows the actual mode of the communication instruments used. A distinction is made between one-way and two-way, i.e., instruments that are purely transmission-oriented and those that are capable of dialog. On the other hand, events were also selected as opportunities for direct interaction and social media, which can be used as a pure sending and an exchange instrument.

In the evaluation, we focus on Cluster 2 (see Figure 8), as social media has only become important in the last 15 years. Despite the hype of social media, however, it is surprising that the one-way orientation has only fallen by 9% and still dominates by far with 49.50%. Interestingly, the rise of social media has been more to the detriment of one-way than two-way instruments, which have only fallen by 2.9% over the same period. This can be interpreted either as PR professionals using social media predominantly as one-way instruments or as the hope for a development towards more exchange and dialogue being placed in social media.

However, this seems a fallacy because most users are still passive. Jakob Nielsen´s 90-9-1 rule describes this (2006), according to which 90% of Internet users are lurkers, i.e., pure observers who do not actively exchange information, 9% are intermittent contributors, which primarily refers to those who react to contributions from others, and only the remaining 1% are referred to as heavy contributors, who proactively create and share contributions.

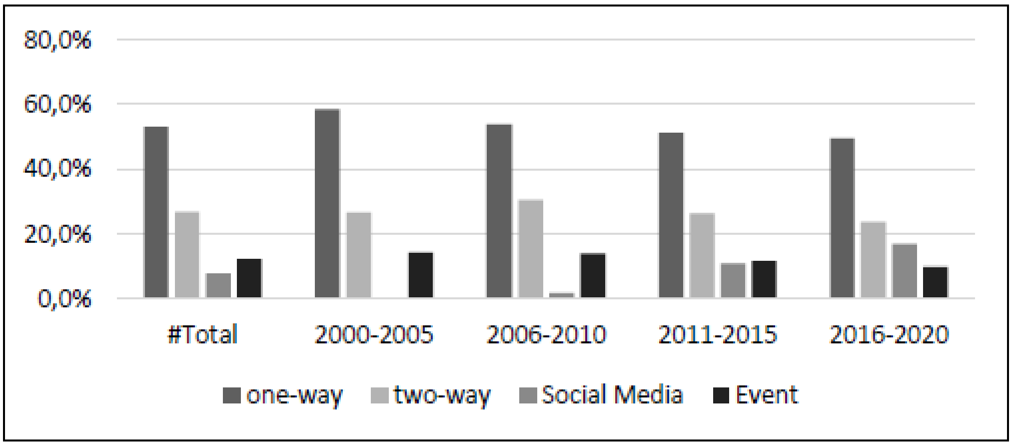

Figure 8: *Communication Mode (Cluster 2: 2000-2020)*

Finally, the distribution of activities between the different media types should be explained. Shown here using the example of Cluster 1, which provides a better overview of the long-term development (see Figure 9)

There are more or less substantial shifts in all three categories: Earned media - i.e., all activities aimed at generating editorial reporting - is still clearly dominant at 57.4%, but more than three decades ago, the proportion was even more pronounced (64.3%). Owned media has become much more important, with an increase from 12.6% at the beginning to 32.7% most recently. In addition to earned media activities, this trend was primarily at the expense of paid media, which fell from 23.0% to 10.0%. One explanation could be that thanks to the internet and social media, more channels and instruments are within organizations' own sphere of influence. This is linked to the hope of playing out content there more cheaply, directly, and unfiltered to their own communities.

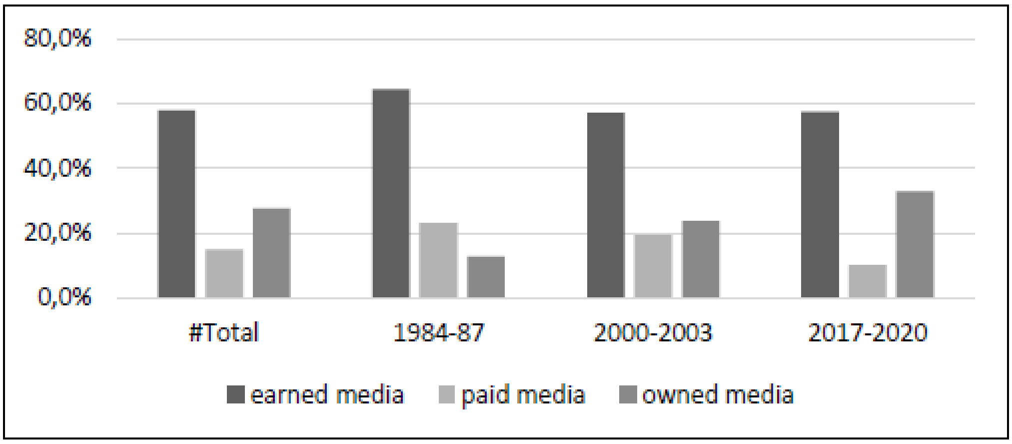

Figure 9: *Types of Media (Cluster 1: 1984-2020)*

Conclusion

The central result of the empirical determination of the status quo is that PR is practiced as an organizational communication function for the implementation or achievement of particular interests, whereby the understanding of communication throughout the 37-year timeframe of the study continues to be unaltered instrumentally shaped.

PR, according to Grunig, serves less of a management function but acts predominantly in a symbolically interpretative mode as an announcer by exclusively propagating corporate policy decisions in an outbound and one-way communication mode and promoting their acceptance among the relevant stakeholders and publics. Thus, most problems are purely expressive, and their triggering moment is primarily identified in the organization itself - with minor environmental sensitivity. Buffering is more on the agenda than bridging.

In doing so, PR acts predominantly on a purely symbolic level and involves few substantial changes in the organization or the offer (product or service). Accordingly, PR is characterized by a solid instrumental orientation. Despite all professionalization efforts, only some significant changes in how PR is operated can be identified over the entire observation period of almost four decades (1984-2020).

Such an instrumental mode of communication does not seem suitable for supporting central goals such as legitimacy and acceptance, reputation, trust, and credibility or dialogue and understanding (see corresponding list of critical strategic issues for PR as a result of the latest European Communication Monitor: Zerfass et al., 2022), which, according to Elster (1987), are essentially by-products and therefore cannot be directly influenced (Dietrich, 2022). In self-perception, however, the situation is different. PR practitioners see a more urgent need for development in their management skills (78.1% of those surveyed see them as highly developed) than in their communication skills, which 91% of those surveyed consider to be perceived as highly developed (Zerfass, Verhoeven, Moreno, Tench, & Verčič, 2020, p. 86). All in all, the actors involved seem to be aware of the PR industry's legitimacy problems but less about the underlying drivers.

This should at least partly serve as an explanation as to why still nothing ever happens, and PR professionals are wondering. But facing the challenges of an instantly faster-developing world full of disruptions, it´s high time to speed up PR professionalization and pay more attention to the performance side. It is about understanding the logic of digitally constituted environments and communities and providing ideas, strategies, and tools to deal with those opportunities and threats. Therefore, we urgently need to expand our know-how of the communicative process.

Critical Reflection and Limitations

We know this methodological approach has limitations, just like any other method. Most empirical PR science results are based on interviews and surveys. For example, the surveys carried out as part of the Communication Monitor (Zerfass, 2007 ongoing), where annual or biannual data has been collected and published since 2007 (Europe), 2014 (Latin America), 2015 (Asia-Pacific), and 2018 (North America). These results are biased due to the uncontrollable composition of the sample and the possibility of multiple participation, which tends to influence the results, aside from the typical biases in reactive methods, such as socially desirable responses occurring both consciously and unconsciously. On the other hand, shadowing studies have been an excellent opportunity to look behind the scenes at what is actually happening since Mintzberg. Still, they are usually precise and highly complex to implement. The latest example is the study by Nothhaft (2011).

The charm of our non-reactive procedure, on the other hand, is that we are not subject to any distortions in the context of an interview or survey, and we can examine exactly those examples of which the PR actors themselves feel is excellent PR and thus observe the self-image of an entire industry. In addition to non-reactivity, further advantages are that the corpus is complete, multiple submissions are not possible, and a good database has been accumulated over a long period (since 1984).

The limiting factors are that the basic policy of the award and the composition of the jury could be a controlling factor and make the submission of some projects more likely than others. However, over the years, we have seen that the range of participating agencies and companies is vast (from large to small companies or agencies, high to low budgets, and participants from all sectors) and that the topics of the projects are very diverse. Furthermore, it could also be that the project description in the submission represents an alternative representation of the actual project process that the jury likes. This can undoubtedly be the case and is neither verifiable nor controllable. Still, it does not represent a severe problem for the study, as this adaptation takes place within the framework of the self-image of excellent PR and thus contributes to the research goal. Another objection to the method could be that the submission criteria favor specific projects. The categories are standardized and identical for all participants. Information on the Initial Situation, Dialogue groups, Definition of Objectives, Strategy, Implementation, and Evaluation must be provided. These are the generally accepted categories for the written representation of concepts (Baerns, 2005) and should not affect the results. It is also striking that the diversity of submissions is encouraged because some subcategories are advertised for specific subject areas, such as Corporate PR, CSR, Digital Communication, Internal PR and Employer Branding, PR for Products & services, and Special PR Projects.

In summary, we think that possible objections to the methodological approach are justified in a weakened form. However, this study should be understood as something other than an individual presentation but should be located in a larger context. Combined with the findings from other studies, which are also quoted here, we contribute to a supplemented and more differentiated presentation of the status quo of the PR industry and its development.

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