

Is the field of corporate communications trying to kidnap public relations?

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ABSTRACT

While a number of public relations scholars and professionals view their field as synonymous with corporate communications, practitioners and theorists of the latter usually claim public relations as alma mater of their discipline yet still see corporate communications overcoming public relations. An analysis of modern literature in corporate communications unveils a battle for power in the field of relationship cultivation between scholars of corporate communications and those of public relations. This article argues that the field of public relations should have an identity based on functional, societal, and organizational goals that goes beyond the link between communication and business outcomes, such as revenues, earnings, and market share, claimed by the field of corporate communications.

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A number of concepts regarding communications management seem to overlap of late, more than at any time in the past: public relations, strategic communication, corporate communications, business communication, organizational communication, marketing, and even human resources all have—or have developed—overlapping meanings.

These different labels may be a reflection of a dynamic and complex field in constant need of transformation and redefinition, but they also create confusion among educators, practitioners, and top managers. There are many examples of this confusion, from several different areas. University professors and professionals often face announcements advertising vacant positions with a variety of titles that make them look different despite the similarities in terms of subjects, courses, and responsibilities. A number of scholars write for journals that serve apparently similar fields of study but find out after submission that the scholarly literature used in these journals can be significantly different, even if the topics

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are not. Students hesitate about which school to choose, because multiple labels and names for programs of seemingly identical subjects and courses can be confusing. Top management in European countries, in need of education about the meaning of public relations – a field which lacks prestige across the entire continent (van Ruler & Verčič, 2004) – are confused by both the variety of disciplinary names, such as corporate communication, public affairs, and institutional relations, and by related professional titles, such as ‘reputation manager’ or ‘director of communications’ (Xifra, 2005).

Despite nuances that do exist, the use of different terminology to refer to similar subjects illustrates that we are talking about a field that is not as mature as we might think. In fact, it could be argued that the field of public relations is insecure about a lack of substance and perhaps too concerned about the bottom line. For those driven by ambitions such as increasing student recruitment, enjoying more prestige in the business world, expanding the market, rejuvenating the discipline, and adapting to changing times that tend toward a convergence of views, it may seem expedient or legitimate to permanently alter the field by changing its name and definition, but such changes can be disconcerting too.

The appropriation of a view of the communication management field as strategic seems to be the most distinctive factor that justifies the use of a different label or terminology. Every communication discipline or subfield claims a greater or lesser contribution to “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Veri, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3). This strategic perspective not only involves corporations but also activist organizations as well as social and citizen movements that try to engage their publics using communication from a multidisciplinary perspective (van Dyke & Verčič, 2009). Most communications management scholars tend to see their own discipline or subfield, generally in comparison with others, as holistic, oriented toward the long term, aligned with organizational and business goals, being a management function, oriented toward reputation building, measurable, and a contributor to the bottom line of businesses. The modern practice of public relations has incorporated this strategic perspective in the way it defines itself. In 2012, the Public Relations Society of America defined public relations as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”

All this talk of relationships raises issues about the *ethos* of public relations in relation to these sometimes relatively new areas who, in their own search for legitimacy, view public relations as a partial, functional, and often

merely technical field. Yet at the same time, they claim part of public relations's legacy.

The purpose of this article, then, is to address three topics related to the relationship between public relations and corporate communications. The first issue is how corporate communications defines public relations as a relatively small – although somewhat essential – portion of its own domain. The second issue concerns the definition of corporate communications and the parts it compounds. The third issue, and perhaps the most important task of the article, is an examination and analysis of why public relations has reached this situation where other close fields try to “kidnap” it.

How corporate communications defines itself and public relations

A number of scholars in the field of corporate communications still see their own field as immature. This perception of immaturity affects even basic issues, such as the name; there is a disagreement about the use of singular or plural to designate corporate communications (although plural seems to be more the norm and thus is used throughout this article). In the 1990s, the confusion concerning the central concepts of corporate communications was seen as unresolved (Irwin & More, 1994; van Riel, 1995) and I argue that this impression still remains. Oliver (1997) puts forward the critique that “the discipline of corporate communication, regardless of semantics, has become a patchwork of multi-media complexity at micro, meso, and macro control levels” (p. 13). Belasen (2008) starts his seminal book, *The Theory and Practice of Corporate Communications*, by acknowledging that the “academic field of corporate communication is scattered, divergent, and lacks coherence” (p. 3).

Nonetheless, corporate communications scholars see their field as an overcoming of the public relations concept. The *ethos* of corporate communications comes from its roots in the Latin word “corpus,” which means “whole body.” Corporate communications “assumes it is possible and desirable for an organization to communicate as one unified whole” (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008, p. vii). Indeed, the field of corporate communications claims a strategic and managerial perspective, theoretically absent in the public relations field, that aligns the mutual interdependency between organizational performance on one hand and corporate identity, corporate reputation, and orchestration of communication on the other (van Riel, 1995, p. 1). Corporate

communications proclaims that it is a coherent and centralized approach to orchestrating internal and external communications aimed at creating favorable relationships with stakeholders on which a company depends (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

For a number of authors working in the field of corporate communications or integrated marketing communications, only the field of corporate communications is able to integrate public relations, marketing, organizational communication, and even human resources communicative dimensions from one strategic management perspective (Cornelissen, 2004, 2008).

There are also political reasons for the use of the corporate communications concept. Almost three decades ago, Olasky (1987) recognized that in order to avoid derogatory terms such as "hucksters," "parrots," and "low-life liars" (p. 1), the use of the term corporate communications seemed a better alternative, politically. For Kitchen (1997), the use of negative imagery associated with public relations is potentially circumvented by the use of the new title, corporate communications. Argenti and Forman (2002) argue that corporate communications would represent honesty and dialogue as opposed to spin, which represents dishonesty, lies, and a lack of hearing. Cornelissen (2004) also acknowledges that the term corporate communications is more acceptable than public relations. Perceptions of the level of recognition of public relations by corporate communications scholars seem to be supported by reality, as managers and executives consider technical skills to be more associated with public relations than strategic skills and do not see public relations as a management function (Wright, 1997).

Interestingly, corporate communications scholars often talk about their own field in a similar way as public relations authors. Oliver (1997) argues that both fields are the ethical conscience of the organization, and their essence is the use of the two-way symmetrical model. Argenti and Barnes (2009) speak of corporate communications as "the business of managing relationships" (p. 1). Goodman and Hirsch (2012) and Argenti (2013) constantly use terms such as corporate communications and corporate public relations interchangeably in their writing. Doorley and Garcia (2007) even see corporate communications as a subset of public relations. In this literature, there is an abundance of long sentences and headlines motivated by the catchall need to apply the same principles to the field of corporate communications and public relations. For example, Doorley and Garcia (2007) title one of their chapters "The future of corporate and organizational communication and public relations" (p. 338) in recognition of the reality that these three fields are intermingled and difficult to differentiate.

Likewise, there are other types of books that use the corporate communications concept in the title yet do not refer to corporate communications inside (Heath, 1994; Dilenschneider, 2000), but rather to public relations or organizational communication.

The field's major journal, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, defines corporate communications as a strategic management function that is part of every employee's responsibility, not just that of the public relations/marketing departments. The practice of public relations tends to be identified as having a merely technical function, such as press or media relations.

Finally, although the field of corporate communications may still lack some coherence, it certainly builds its identity with and in opposition to the field of public relations, which it considers to be functional, technical, and in many ways a leftover of the past.

The parts that comprise corporate communications

One of the main features of corporate communications is, in theory, the variety of perspectives the field provides on the role of communication. Corporate communications scholars claim that the concept of corporate communications avoids marketing's imperialistic notion of target audiences—also denounced by public relations scholars (Grunig & Grunig, 1998). Corporate communications scholars bring public relations and marketing together (Christensen et al., 2008).

However, among corporate communications scholars there are a variety of interpretations about the subfields that should remain under the umbrella of corporate communications. It is very common to find long lists of terms trying to capture the essence of corporate communications:

Corporate communication takes up such vital issues to modern corporations as communication policy, communication management, health and risk communication, communication with shareholders, publicity and advertising, issues communication and management, health and risk communication, crisis communication, the new media as they are used by corporations, international, and cross-cultural communication, and the role of communication in technology transfer. (Irwin & More, 1994, p. 6)

Argenti and Forman (2002) argue that corporate communications em-

braces areas traditionally considered public relations domains, such as corporate reputation, corporate advertising and advocacy, employee communications, investor relations, government relations, media management, and crisis communications. *The Handbook of the Harvard Business School* (2006) includes public relations, community relations, media relations, shareholder relations, employee relations, advertising, and marketing communication. Christensen et al. (2008) mention public relations, marketing, organizational communication, and human resource management as the most important subfields. Hubner (2007) embraces public relations, marketing, and management communication. Argenti and Barnes (2009) put marketing, media relations, internal communications, investor relations, corporate social responsibility, public affairs, and crisis communications under the umbrella of corporate communications. For van Riel (2007), the field of corporate communications encompasses marketing communication, organizational communication, and management communication. Goodman and Hirsch (2010, 2012) also include public relations, crisis and emergency communication, corporate citizenship, reputation management, community relations, media relations, investor relations, employee relations, government relations, marketing communication, management communication, corporate branding and image building, and advertising. Among the strategic functional areas managed by corporate communications, these authors cite the study by Corporate Communication International (Goodman, Genest, Bertoli, Templo, & Wolman, 2013) that includes public relations, media relations, and a number of subfields that also fall under the umbrella of public relations, such as communication strategy, crisis communication, employee communication, intranet communication, social media, issues management, annual report, and community relations.

Other authors have a more global view, such as Kitchen (1997) and Cornelissen (2004), who see the justification for corporate communications as a holistic strategy and societally-oriented concept that merges public relations and marketing communications within its strategic domain. Moreover, Cornelissen (2004) conceptualizes it as an intersection set where marketing and public relations overlap in a number of features, such as image assessment, customer satisfaction, corporate reputation, media strategy, corporate advertising, and employee attitudes.

Some authors, such as Oliver (1997), draw a parallel between corporate communications and strategic public relations, making a clear distinction between the use of the two-way symmetrical model (as well as Grunig's ten principles of excellent public relations) and other persuasive models. A less common perspective is exemplified by Doorle and Garcia (2007), who see cor-

porate communications as a subset of public relations and who make no distinctions when talking about corporate communications executives and public relations practitioners.

I contend that the field of corporate communications views its role as the merger of internal and external communications with a management function. Perceived as a technical function by corporate communication scholars, the discipline of public relations is fragmented, emptied, and therefore minimized in corporate communications literature. In the best-case scenario, public relations includes sponsorships, events, media relations, and crisis and issues management (van Riel, 2007), but for a number of influential authors, public relations consists mostly of story placement and media relations (Cornelissen, 2008; Argenti, 2013). A number of subfields that are considered an integral part of the public relations field, such as employee relations, investor relations, government relations, and even media relations, are treated as if they are part of a different discipline. In this sense, the construction of the corporate communications field has been at the expense of the prestige of public relations as a field.

It can be argued that practitioners and theorists in the field of corporate communications portrays it as an amalgam of more established fields, such as public relations, marketing, and organizational communication, while at the same time positions itself to senior management as unique in terms of strategy and management. While this patchwork identity offers a number of advantages, the way corporate communications defines public relations is problematic and does not take into consideration that there are some fundamental differences between the two disciplines mainly based on different assumptions of the social role of communication.

Is the field of corporate communications trying to kidnap public relations?

It is not the first time that there has been an attempt to define the field of public relations from outside and put its identity under question. The relationship between the fields of corporate communications and public relations is relatively similar to the relationship between marketing and public relations in the 1970s. Then, public relations employed mostly persuasive models, making public relations and marketing look more alike. For a number of marketing scholars, the field of public relations was considered to primarily

have a technical support function for marketing (Kotler & Mindak, 1978; Harris, 1993).

By picking apart public relations and all its traditional subfields, the field of corporate communications debilitates the discipline of public relations for its own benefit and, in a way, kidnaps the most valuable part of public relations: its strategic perspective. Furthermore, despite the fact that, for instance, Grunig and Hunt (1984) are often cited as the main theorists of corporate communications (Hubner, 2007; van Riel, 2007; Cornelissen, 2008; Argenti, 2012), public relations is often identified as a mere technical function. However, in those areas where the field of corporate communication lacks an identity or brand capital – such as data on the profession or about its precedents and history – corporate communications claims the legacy of public relations. For example, when Oliver (1997) describes some research approaches to corporate communications, she frequently uses public relations documents and theories, such as the Delphi study by the Institute for Public Relations (Watson, 2008) and Grunig's four models of public relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Likewise, Argenti (2012) and Goodman and Hirsch (2012) use the same authors that are taken into consideration in the history of public relations – names such as Edward Bernays, Walter Lippmann, Ivy Lee, and Arthur Page – as precedents of corporate communications or corporate public relations.

Interestingly, corporate communications scholars overlook the fact that many of the professional surveys in which practitioners describe the profession as well as their work in government relations, employee communications, or investor relations were implemented by public relations firms or public relations departments. The concept of corporate communications itself is, in fact, a normative ideal that has not been experienced in many organizations. The integration of marketing and public relations into corporate communications has perhaps been promoted by powerhouses such as IBM and Citigroup as the standard, where marketing and public relations exist under the umbrella of corporate communications, but this is not the standard in corporate America, nor in the rest of the world. In the European Union, public relations practitioners only become corporate communicators to avoid identification with a field that lacks academic credentials (van Ruler, Verčič, Flodin, & Bütschi, 2001) or to avoid being perceived as mere masters of ceremonies (Muzi, 2009). The term corporate communications is still used in many parts of the world as a label – along with external relations or even business communication – and, in many cases, there is no rationale beyond avoiding the negative connotation of public relations.

Some final reflections

According to the Public Relations Society of America (2013), currently 80 percent of MBA programs offer no meaningful coursework in reputation management or corporate communications.

Previously, neither the field of public relations nor the field of corporate communications had been effective in positioning communication management as a management function among organizational leaders. In this sense, the field of public relations has not been able practice effective public relations for itself.

Although not fully effective, the concept of corporate communications has been shown to be more persuasive in convincing CEOs and top executives about the value of communications management for the bottom line. Corporate communications professors and scholars such as Paul Argenti and Joep Cornelissen tend to teach in business schools whose textbooks are widely used in the field of corporate communications, while public relations at the undergraduate level is usually taught in arts faculties at universities, frequently in communication departments or under the umbrella of schools of communications, and often grouped together with disciplines such as journalism or film and video studies.

I rarely find any criticism of the field when I attend academic conferences, where self-justification is the norm. Public relations professors usually pride themselves on the growth in the number of students as proof of the good health of the field.

However, the recent rapid growth in student numbers is not the whole truth, as public relations has not reached the status it deserves among the people who make business decisions. Managers complain about the lack of public relations graduates with well-rounded minds; about research based on jargon concepts that circumvent business reality; the establishment of normative ideals disconnected from business practices; the overabundance of quantitative research measuring phenomena that become worthwhile as study subjects just because they are measurable but not because they are intrinsically important; the loss of prestige among academics of case study research – still highly valued in business schools and by professionals as a knowledge method; and last but not least, there is a lack of subject relevance, because research published in scholarly journals lacks the immediacy required by a field like public relations, where the analysis of current affairs counts.

Furthermore, the field of public relations has not shown enough open-

ness to incorporate more research from related communications management areas. For example, only three articles include the term 'corporate communications' in their keywords in the *Public Relations Review* search engine, while 12 articles refer to 'corporate communications' as a keyword in the *Journal of Public Relations Research*. On the opposite side, 65 articles contain 'public relations' as a keyword in *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*. Interdisciplinary engagement within and outside the field of communication should be a plus in a communication era where most areas of knowledge have become interconnected.

A last issue, not necessarily minor, for improving perceptions of the field of public relations among business leaders is to use the term public relations without embarrassment. It is interesting to note that the term 'public relations' is practically absent, replaced by strategic communication or corporate communications in the Public Relations Society of America's latest initiative to support MBA and business school education in public relations. Indeed, the MBA level course in "strategic communication" is described on the Public Relations Society of America website (PRSA, 2013) as covering areas such as corporate communications, integrated marketing communication, investor relations, corporate social responsibility, government relations, and crisis communications.

If it is to position itself as strategic and thus avoid being kidnapped, the field of public relations must find its own voice in the area of communications management by placing more emphasis on measurement. This means going beyond the idea that public relations needs to calculate its impact on the return on investment (ROI), circumventing other intangible assets that define public relations as a discipline, "such as intellectual capital, customer satisfaction and loyalty, corporate reputation, positive stakeholder relations, employee satisfaction and loyalty, corporate culture or the ubiquitous 'goodwill'" (Likely, 1999, p. 1), that shape a well-perceived organization. It is also necessary to recognize that ROI is a "fuzzy concept" from a public relations perspective (Watson & Zerfass, 2011, p. 11), which drives home the fact that public relations must stop mimicking the business language of financial management without the parameters to link communication actions and monetary outcomes (Watson, 2005). Rather, the "fuzzy" link between public relations and ROI suggests that public relations operates in a complex arena and legitimately focuses on the measurement of the quality of relationships in greater detail (Gregory & Watson, 2008) and a total performance measurement framework (Likely, 2006). Indeed, public relations needs to focus on developing its own set of metrics that capture the relational and pragmatic value it adds to

organizations.

The bottom line needs to move beyond profit to people and planet, as suggested by the term “triple bottom line,” coined by John Elkington (2009). There is a genuine sense of altruism in the public relations discipline that serves organizations best when it helps all key publics work in cooperation to make society function better and serve collective needs (Heath, 2006; Flynn et al., 2008), not when doing good is just an obligation. For example, the initiative of Starbucks to pay for the university degrees of employees that work more than 20 hours per week without a commitment to stay in the company helps society as a whole. Through an agreement with Arizona State University, Starbucks helps its employees, ASU, the state budget, and itself. It is doubtful that a “checkbook philanthropy” mentality would have ever approved of this initiative. How can the ROI of paying for university studies for thousands of employees be measured? Probably not in a very favourable way if profit and loss is the sole measure.

Bowen (2009) has noted how public relations scholars have said that becoming part of the dominant coalition is a main goal for the field. Perhaps the time has come to move on to a more social role for public relations, which today means moving beyond financial considerations and toward social and environmental motivations. Therefore, public relations and corporate communications could be clearly differentiated as simply having different goals. Public relations might focus on functional, societal, and organizational outcomes with the purpose of building mutually beneficial relationships between key stakeholders instead of succumbing to the temptation of searching for a magic empirical/monetary measurement method that appeals to senior managers. Corporate communications might acknowledge that it is an amalgam of more established fields, such as public relations, marketing, and organizational communication, and that its priority is related to business outcomes, such as earnings, sales, and market share, to communication, even if these are to be pursued at the expense of other societal goals.

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