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Introduction to configuring intelligences for 21C public relations

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ABSTRACT

The Call for Papers (CFP) for the Barcelona International PR Conference and for this special issue claimed that many in public relations “acknowledge the present as a time of rapid change, turbulence, and even transformation.” Then, citing Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and minds for the future (Gardner, 2008), the CFP asked for contributions exploring “what configurations of knowledge might best prepare the field to meet these challenges.” In responding to the call, the articles that follow range across different disciplines, cover different times and spaces, and include collisions as well as collaborations. In the process they confirm, even in intelligence controversies, the constitutive nature of communication and they put forward ideas with implications for practice as well as theory.

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1. Introduction and intelligences

These special issue articles begin and end with authors not only configuring intelligences but including outcomes for practice, pedagogy, and problem solving. Appropriately, given the iconoclastic nature of many Barcelona conference participants, the first of the special issue articles opens with a direct challenge to the whole project. Jim Macnamara’s “Multiple Intelligences and Minds as Attributes to Reconfigure PR: A Critical Analysis” takes on board the CFP’s promotion of Gardner’s (1983) work on intelligences but also “takes it on” in the sense of critiquing it conceptually and discursively. In considering what he terms the “alleged discovery of multiple intelligences,” Macnamara asks “why not simply call them abilities rather than refer to them as new types of intelligence?” since the “descriptions of each of Gardner’s eight intelligences explicitly refer to skills, capacities and potential. . . , it can be legitimately argued that they are applications of human intelligence as described in other definitions – not a particular form of intelligence.”

Macnamara reinforces the challenge in his question in summarizing the associated views of Eysenck and other supporters of traditional IQ as the sole intelligence and in dismissing Gardner and other plural intelligences writers for having no adequate categorization and/or empirical evidence and therefore no valid claim to use the plural. With typically engaging and forceful prose, Macnamara buttresses this case by associating the intelligences plural writers with Briers’ (2012) *Psychobabble: Exploding the Myths of the Self-help Generation* and marketing hype. Nevertheless, while presenting the IQ side of the debate, Macnamara points out an associated theoretical absence in PR:

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While public relations theory building has recognized many elements of context (e.g., power) and contextualizing theories such as framing, priming, and orientation, it has curiously largely ignored one fundamentally important theory related to where one stands socially, culturally, politically, economically, and ideologically in making assessments, undertaking learning, and developing and applying skills.

Although careful not to call it an intelligence, Macnamara helpfully revives and repurposes “standpoint theory” to engage with this omission and to argue “that the central tenets of standpoint theory. . . can usefully inform the intelligence/s (ways of thinking) and mindfulness applied in public relations” since “all learning, thinking, reasoning, and one’s ability to perceive, feel, empathize, and understand others are determined by one’s standpoint.”

Macnamara ends in two ways. The first outlines a substantial reconfiguration emerging in businesses through growing pressures on them to apply “the collective intelligence of their employees and customers” with associated needs “to operate as a ‘social business.’” The second concludes that standpoint-influenced theories and concepts “defy dismissal as Leftist philosophy and point to the future of organization-public relations and communication in the 21st century.”

2. From standpoint theory to futures intelligence and competitive intelligence

In contrast to Macnamara’s approach, Juliet Roper’s “Futures Intelligence: Applying Gardner to Public Relations,” concentrates not on contesting Gardner’s ideas but on applying, extending, and synthesizing them into what she calls “Futures Intelligence.” Accepting that [Gardner’s \(2008\)](#) five minds can be taught, Roper identifies opportunities to teach them to Business Schools in general and to public relations students in particular. One of her key questions is how do Gardner’s concepts “feature in our teaching of public relations students, most of whom will enter the business world but are frequently trained in communication or journalism faculty and/or enrolled in narrowly focused programs?”

Roper also draws from the common view in futures and sustainability thinking that if you do not create your own future, you’ll be condemned to live in someone else’s. From this perspective, Roper states that “If a barrier to teaching public relations differently is an inability to imagine a world where current ways of doing business will not be possible, and certainly not legitimate.” She addresses this by proposing that “futures intelligence,” can be built from Gardner’s minds and, by “adding a futurist dimension, may well provide a platform for change.” More specifically, she calls for more widespread use of scenario planning as part of this process and illustrates the gains in education from her classroom experiences. These align with her belief that not only do we “have a responsibility to do what we can to equip future leaders – in business or in any other field – for an increasingly dynamic and uncertain world” but we “also have a responsibility to help these leaders – our students – to critically envision what sort of world they want for their own future and for that of their children.”

Roper concludes that in “practical terms for public relations, in developing futures intelligence we are also creating a future for the industry that is central to organizational strategic planning” and by thus “developing futures intelligence based on Gardner’s disciplined, synthesizing, creating, respectful and ethical minds with the addition of futurist perspectives we provide tomorrow’s public relations practitioners with the critical tools necessary for building a sustainable industry and society.”

The article that follows Roper’s article, Rubén Arcos “Public Relations Strategic Intelligence: Intelligence Analysis, Communication and Influence,” is also forward-looking albeit with a more short term outlook. In addition, it has a more institutional approach focused around interdisciplinary clusters in ways appropriate to Arcos’ position in the Rey Juan Carlos University’s Centre for Intelligence Services and Democratic Systems in Madrid. Arcos’ article is also one of the most business oriented pieces in the special issue as he sets PR alongside other processes in organizations.

Arcos conceptualizes intelligence as the “corporate function and management process consisting of the legal and ethical systematic collection, analysis, interpretation and timely communication of relevant information to internal clients and other intelligence consumers for facilitating their decision making processes.” He goes on to explore how it can contribute to the practice of PR and strategic communication “by enabling a superior relationships management capability through information and analysis that might result in a competitive advantage.” He cites [Fleisher’s \(1999\)](#) allied idea of “Public Policy Competitive Intelligence (PPCI) as a type of competitive intelligence activity that develops actionable intelligence about the public policy environment that could affect the competitive position of a firm (p. 27), and that provides early warning of threats and opportunities emerging from the global public policy environment, and analyzes how they will affect the achievement of a company’s strategy” (p. 24).

Not content with just defining his concept, Arcos circles around different senses of intelligence in different contexts and disciplines. Using this approach he sets up lots of comparisons and contrasts between business methods – it is unusual to see references in public relations to Porter’s famous five forces but rare indeed to add “Baron’s Four-I’s framework, [([Baron, 1995](#)) and] Bach and Allen’s (IA)³ framework [([Bach & Allen, 2010](#)) to the mix” and tabulating them to make the relationships clear.

Arcos argues for PR Intelligence to become a component of competitive intelligence and sees particular value in moving away from issues management as it is a more loaded term than intelligence. At points, his work overlaps with Roper especially as he concludes that “Stakeholder analysis, issue analysis, Porter’s Five Forces industry analysis, or STEEP/environmental analysis constitutes a part of the analytic frameworks and techniques that are used in Competitive Intelligence (see [Fleisher & Bensoussan, 2003](#))” and selects specific areas for synergies – “structured analysis, foresight, estimative intelligence and

communication of uncertainty in analytic judgments” – to help establish a more strategic public relations that aligns with, and complements, competitive intelligence.

3. Institutionalized intelligence and feminist intelligence

Also from Spain, and also future oriented, Ferran Lalueza and Ramon Girona's article, "The Impact of Think Tanks on Mass Media Discourse Regarding the Economic Crisis in Spain" examines one major source of institutionalized futures intelligence. As Lalueza and Girona's research study shows, think tanks have a substantial Spanish as well as international presence. Indeed, they list 27 think tanks in Spain and the list excludes specialist ones not related to economics and those almost totally inactive on their selected economic topic.

This can raise problems since forthcoming international research paints a pessimistic picture of think tanks as an influential part of "an unholy squad" (Munshi & Kurian, 2015; in press), who seek to avoid action on ecological risks and to restrain the building of sustainable citizenship:

Anthropogenic climate change is widely acknowledged as the most serious existential threat facing the planet. Unchecked, it will trigger sea level rise and extreme weather conditions, spread disease, destroy agricultural systems, threaten the lives and livelihoods of millions of people, and render earth uninhabitable. Despite this stark scientific and ecological reality, an unholy squad of fossil fuel industries, mass media, conservative think-tanks primarily in the US, and a handful of contrarian scientists have come together to thwart any kind of meaningful action on climate change. (Munshi & Kurian, 2015; in press)

Lalueza and Girona's piece offers some reassurance on one recent area of major social concern, the economic crisis. On this issue, despite the neo-liberal backing for many think tanks, their research finds that these institutions had "very limited influence on the media." Their conclusions are confirmed by other research although those other findings also determined that "Spanish think tanks tend to foster direct contact with relevant political actors rather than achieving this via the media." Thus there is the paradox that they can still be influential if less visible.

In line with the Spanish research, Rich's (2004) U.S. work on think tanks led to a similar conclusion that despite "their growing numbers and increased activism, there is little indication that the overall impact of think tanks as sources of expertise is growing. Think tank influence does not seem to have expanded in proportion to the growth in think tank numbers" (p. 204). Significantly for public relations, Girona and Lalueza's research also "suggest that although not a widespread model, some atypical think tanks, contrary to what might be expected of a laboratory of ideas, achieve more impact from what they do (scholarship programs, projects for entrepreneurs, online portals. . .)" – or, in other words, PR activities, rather "than what they say."

Speech and discourse features strongly in the next article, Kate Fitch, Melanie James, and Judy Motion's "Talking back: Reflecting on feminism, public relations and research." Fitch et al.'s approach contrasts sharply with the institutional investigation of think tank influence. Working with a notion also akin to Foucault's (1980) "specific intellectual" (p. 128), the article focuses on three sets of personal experiences and their three main areas of relevance: Fitch uses her research on the history of the public relations industry in Australia, gender, professionalism, and occupational identity, and contemporary PR discourse; James draws from her work on positioning theory (James, 2014, 2015) and employs it to focus on how the gendered social force of positioning acts in public relations; and Motion draws from her own body of critical PR scholarship (Heath, Motion & Leitch, 2010; Motion & Leitch, 2007; Motion & Weaver, 2005) to examine and "to problematize how power relations and discursive struggles play out in popular culture."

While noting recent advances in feminist public relations scholarship, Fitch et al. go back to get a better future in two ways: firstly, to develop bell hooks' seminal notion of talking back, or speaking as an equal to an authority figure, and, secondly, to attempt to define "feminist intelligences" or modalities for public relations and, indeed, to grapple with what a feminist public relations research agenda might entail."

Drawing attention to current leading women with a women's agenda, such as Hillary Clinton from the U.S. and Helen Clark from New Zealand, Fitch et al. state "The challenge for those of us who do not work at this level, is to find ways to integrate feminist modalities into our professional and everyday lives." While acknowledging recent critical perspectives work by Daymon and Demetrious (2014) on gender and public relations and Tindall and Waters (2013) on LGBT issues in strategic communication with theory and research, Fitch et al. observe how public relations still lags behind other disciplines in responding to feminist theory, especially critical feminist theory. They seek to foster "back talk" for women finding "voices and challenging those who seek to silence and close down emergent critical approaches." Appropriately, they then structure their discussion around "three broad themes: provocations, transgressions and resistance" and the three major areas of agenda setting, social justice and change, and praxis.

Fitch et al.'s main question is "What is feminism for?" And they answer that question by exploring how it might aid resistance to dominant thinking in PR, how it might call into question existing knowledge configurations, and how it can assist in bringing "about real change in gendered hierarchies in the industry in terms of salaries and status, and address the heteronormative assumptions that continue to inform the public relations research agenda." For the "feminist intelligence" perspective of Fitch et al., these are the issues that "deserve further research."

4. Film, uncertainty and wicked problems

The next article, Ángel Quintana and Jordi Xifra's "Visual-spatial intelligence in propaganda and public relations discourse: The case of Roberto Rossellini's early and educational-historical films," is unlike any other article in the issue. It takes us into unusual territory for public relations by adding a unique "visual-spatial intelligence" to the field from one of cinema's best-known auteurs. Quintana and Xifra offer a sophisticated and detailed film analysis to illustrate how complex the decision on what constitutes fascist propaganda can be. Since the post-symmetry abandonment of the absolute separation of public relations and propaganda, PR increasingly has to come to terms with its past as propaganda. To engage effectively will require methodological input from other fields to make the finer distinctions within different kinds of texts. This need will increase in intensity as social media fuses disparate media forms and genres into fresh configurations with ever-improving technology.

Quintana and Xifra's article opens by arguing for a bias in PR's consideration of media with a bias in favor of representations of the profession in feature films, with a smaller body of criticism, which has introduced documentary and audiovisual productions "as new objects of study in research into the elements of public relations film discourse." Quintana and Xifra place their piece firmly into the "new objects of study" research tradition and focus on less well-known works in Italian director Roberto Rossellini's oeuvre. They go on to argue those productions illustrate Gardner's (1993) "visual-spatial intelligence" in action.

In justifying the use of the term, Quintana and Xifra describe how, in the selected films, Rossellini "invented and used a new zoom lens to improve the realistic effects: the Pancinor" and go on to describe how it highlights Rossellini's abilities as "one of the great exponents of visual-spatial intelligence before the age of digital cinema". In studying two specific periods of Rossellini's filmmaking, Quintana and Xifra also contend that the Italian director's work "evolved coherently from propaganda to didacticism, approaching reality from the postulates of documentary cinema and always avoiding manipulation via cinematic language." Quintana and Xifra observe how this "makes these films interesting objects of study for the investigation of a cinematographic grammar characteristic of public relations discourse, as opposed to the war propaganda discourse used by European and American cinema during World War II and the post-war years."

Quintana and Xifra also make a contribution to PR history in arguing that "the so-called European School of Public Relations, which proposed Christian humanitarianism approach to public relations, has to be included as a part of the Christian phenomenology effects on the post-war French intellectuals, thinkers and scholars." (Xifra, 2014). They support this with extracts from one of the last papers of Lucien Matrat, who led this group (of public relations scholars and practitioners), and who "defended the idea that the public relations process can be compared with an education process" and that, therefore "public relations can be approached as a pedagogical operation." Quintana and Xifra then suggest that the idea of Lucien Matrat and the European PR School "stands on the same foundations as Roberto Rossellini films: human beings."

As with Macnamara's opening article, the penultimate article, McKie and Heath's "Public Relations as a Strategic Intelligence for the 21st Century: Contexts, Controversies, and Challenges" addresses the CFP directly. McKie and Heath position uncertainty as the key zeitgeist marker for the present century and then set out to explore PR as a "strategic intelligence" to engage uncertainty and risk management as "essentially the discipline of seeking to know but otherwise coping with the unknown, or the partially (and even badly), known." McKie and Heath then integrate these with storytelling before revisiting Gardner's account of how he found communication to be central to his success.

They observe that, in retrospectively discussing the success of *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* in the third edition, Gardner (2011) encountered the constitutive power of communication directly. Looking back on the success of his book and ideas, he reflected on how choosing the vocabulary "'multiple intelligences' rather than 'assorted abilities' or 'sundry gifts'" (Gardner, 2011; p. xi) and how this choice and his preference for *Frames of Mind* over "Seven Talents" (p. xi) were "crucial turning points" in the book's subsequent success. McKie and Heath note how his use of multiple intelligences inspired a search for other intelligences capable of gaining popular appeal and observe how these ranged from appreciative intelligence (relatively unsuccessful) through cultural intelligence (relatively successful) to emotional intelligence (hugely successful).

Unfortunately for PR's status McKie and Heath did not pin down PR to a single intelligence but the search helped clarify its distinctive qualities and the quest remains open. They did, however, raise important questions: "is it sound to reason that public relations is a strategic intelligence for managing uncertainty reduction needed to make society fully functioning?" and "Does it likewise presume that intelligence is the ability to bend society to the service of organizations?" And they conclude by reconsidering the challenge facing public relations as:

whether it prefers, perhaps inspired to serve an institutional master, to tell a story to serve an interest (e.g., that of the sponsor). Or, will it look more deeply and as a means for achieving a collective judgment to find – and be – an intelligence that proactively resolves as much uncertainty as possible – in the public arena – and to serve a truly public interest.

The final article, Paul Willis' "From Humble Inquiry to Humble Intelligence: Confronting Wicked Problems and Augmenting Public Relations," takes the reconfiguration seriously by attempting one reframing and two upgrades. The reframing is to characterize many functional practitioner problems as "wicked problems" (WPs) for which Willis provides a list of ten

defining characteristics. These characteristics – “there is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem,” “every solution is a ‘one-shot operation’; because there is no

opportunity to learn from trial-and-error,” and “wicked problems do not have an exhaustively describable set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan” – are likely to be recognized by professionals.

Having set the challenge, Willis, as befits a former practitioner, follows a practical problem solving structure with the two upgrades: the first is to import Schein's (2013) concept of *Humble Inquiry* and raise it to the level of an intelligence (abbreviated to HI for convenience and in line with informal protocols for creating intelligences); and the second is, akin to McKie and Heath's concluding concern, to raise the reputation of the field. However, Willis does so uniquely by aligning HI strategically with other developments inside and outside of PR since “as well as gaining traction on seemingly intractable challenges, HI both complements and adds value to dialogic theories of PR.”

As befits a former practitioner, Willis follows a practical problem solving structure and sells his approach convincingly. He makes “the case for why an appreciation of wicked problems is important for public relations from both a functional and societal perspective,” illustrating how “the framing of relevant organizational challenges as wicked problems can help to change perceptions about the strategic role of communication,” and how the importance of dialogue in “taming” WPs signals the pivotal role PR can play in their resolution. Furthermore, the scope and magnitude of wicked problems means this role has the potential to extend beyond the functional concerns of organizations and into society. These insights provide a unifying purpose for the discipline which supports a growing body of research concerned with the enactment of dialogic strategies and practices.

In short Willis' second proposed upgrade suggests that PR can gain positive social recognition for visibly assisting society. Having laid out the program, he concludes that not only can humble intelligence help assist everyday practice but by bringing PR “center stage through progressive practices associated with dialogue and collaboration,” public relations “can set its sights on an expanded organizational role and a more socially enlightened future.”

5. Postscript

There is a contradiction at the core of the PhD, the top academic qualification. We ask doctoral candidates to make an original contribution to knowledge and then, when they do it, we often struggle to find examiners, or to be examiners adequately qualified to assess the originality of that contribution. For similar reasons, this special issue was one of the trickiest we've ever edited and we sincerely apologize for taking so long and, in some cases, failing to meet *Public Relations Review's* laudable turnaround times. Although pleased that we identified an area rarely researched in PR, we were rather short-sighted in not anticipating how few authors, even on the extensive *Public Relations Review* data base of reviewers, made any claim to expertise or research interest in intelligence.

This proved to be the case even once we widened our search with additional adjectives frequently linked with intelligence (e.g., “collaborative,” “competitive,” and “creative”). The scarcity further supported the CFP's initial premise that intelligence and intelligences – as well as their associated terms – were neglected. Few reviewers had declared interests or keywords or abstracts that had links; even extenuated links; with the terms. As a result; our reviewer search often proved fruitless; and then a number of reviewers found themselves unable to complete their reviews in time or; in some cases; at all. So a special thank you to all those reviewers who entered unfamiliar territory and provided helpful feedback. We end with the hope that the experience of both authors and reviewers will create a critical mass of PR scholars interested in future intelligences research. For the next field whose efforts win widespread recognition as an important intelligence; the rewards in terms of academic and public influence – as both Gardner's MI and Goleman's EI have shown – can be huge. We think it would be remiss of PR to stop striving.

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