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Futures intelligence: Applying Gardner to public relations

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relevance of Howard Gardner's concept of "Five minds for the future" to the field of public relations, both for practitioners and educators. It extends Gardner's concept by adding a futures dimension to generate what I term "futures intelligence" that I argue is now necessary for the sustainability of the public relations field itself as well as of its clients. Futures intelligence is forward thinking, strategic, positive and empathetic. With its emphasis on future possibilities, futures intelligence not only provides practical ability to use the tools by which practitioners can plan and adapt for the long term but does this by taking into account societies' collective needs rather than those of self-serving individuals. The paper illustrates a process of building futures intelligence with a description of innovative teaching to post graduate public relations students at a university in New Zealand.

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1. Introduction

Howard Gardner, famous for his seminal work that explores the range of "intelligences" that we humans may possess, went on to develop "Five Minds for the Future" (2009) with a view to encouraging us as students, teachers, practitioners and citizens to cultivate the types of thinking and behaviour that he believes will enable humans to continue to thrive into the future. His "five minds" are "disciplined", "synthesizing", "creating", "respectful", and "ethical" (Gardner, 2009) and are seen as necessarily complementary, all to be acquired by each of us, rather than acquired separately. They are prescriptive in that they are not reflective of current norms. Instead, they are put forward in recognition of their absence in today's society and their importance in our collective, not our individual, future. Further, they are based upon Gardner's speculations about the directions in which society is headed with the purpose of equipping us "to deal with what is expected, as well as what cannot be anticipated".

A key point that Gardner makes is that in an interconnected world we cannot continue to be individualistically narrow in our work and living; we must think beyond our own personal and institutional silos and re-embrace a more respectful, ethical and inclusive lifestyle. The public relations field is certainly no exception, and indeed, at least through its claim to the practice of issues and crisis management, it has an obligation to raise its awareness of future conditions and demands for clients. In this paper, I relate Gardner's "Five Minds for the Future" to the future of public relations in order to generate what I call, with due respect to Gardner, "Futures Intelligence". To do so, I first give an overview of the limited attention paid so far to an open-minded look to the future for a public relations industry that it is not restricted by current norms, expectations and biases. I then examine Gardner's five minds from the perspectives of public relations practise and education, before

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bringing the two discussions together. By way of both illustration and advocacy for change, I also describe our conscious development of futures intelligence through the teaching that we engage in with our public relations students.

2. Public relations futures: an historical perspective

As early as 1980, Jay Mendell observed that public relations practitioners, with their "facility for applied psychology and communications", "have a unique opportunity – indeed, a responsibility – to try to discover what corporate planners, market researchers, and management consultants have failed to discover: the way to make an organisation responsive to its changing environment" and noted that "today, organisations may be ready to listen to practitioners who can explain that the world is more complex, changeable and uncertain than craft consciousness – the set of preconceptions with which management is comfortable – admits" (Mendell, 1980, p. 15). Mendell's comments were also cited by Turk (1986) when she pointed out that public relations practitioners faced a choice between clinging to technical, functional skills or looking to the future as strategic innovators – indeed, as futurists. Turk went further and claimed that public relations professionals were already choosing the strategist/futurist option and that in doing so were "sweeping institutions into a forward-thinking process" (p. 13). That either Turk's claim holds true to any great extent, or that Mendell's recommendation was taken up, is not evident today, unless that strategic branch of public relations, following the European tradition, no longer operates under that name, but instead is known, for example, as strategic communication, or communication management (Moreno, Verhoeven, Tench, & Zerfass, 2009a, 2009b). Van Ruler and Vercic (2005) recommend the latter on the grounds that the use of "communication" as in "communication management" allows divergence away from a focus on publics towards a greater role in organisational strategy planning. Even so, as evidenced by Moreno et al. (2009a, 2009b), in practise communication professionals continue to have a limited role in organisational planning and decision making.

Fiur (1984) similarly made an early call for a change of focus for the public relations industry to a much broader, strategic and adaptable remit. His argument was that to remain in an essentially press agent role would not only ensure that public relations never receives the status now accorded professions such as law and medicine, but that it would become redundant in the face of accelerating change. His suggested mission statement for the public relations industry is worth citing for its continued relevance today:

> Public relations is the management function primarily responsible for shaping and implementing policies of mediation amongst social, political, and economic interests capable of influencing the growth and/or survival of an organisation's basic franchise. To this end, the public relations function has responsibility also for identifying the forces and effects of change in the organisation's environment so as to anticipate potential new needs for mediation, and to inform all other anticipatory activity within the organisation (p. 383).

At the core of this forward-looking statement is recognition of the need – even "responsibility" – for change for the industry itself as its clients also face change and uncertainty and begin to accept that short term strategies that do not take people and other forces of change into account cannot be sustainable into the long term.

These calls for a forward-looking public relations industry were made 30–35 years ago by a very small group of visionaries, yet there is little evidence that they were listened to, let alone taken up. It is interesting, given the comparison with law and medicine, that these fields also face serious credibility issues. However, medicine, in recognising fundamental problems in the branch of academic medicine, for example, is actively seeking the best ways for adaptation into the future (Clark, 2005).

How can public relations take up a more strategic role and become essential to managers of change? Fiur (1984) and Turk (1986) both suggested that a key role for a reimagined public relations field is anticipation of the future, and offered four means by which that could be achieved: environmental assessment; issue analysis; scenario writing; and cross-impact studies. In the thirty years since, public relations has certainly taken an interest in the first two. Issues analysis, however, is primarily focused on protecting an organisation's strategic plan (Heath, 1997) rather than a reimagination of what that plan might be. Arguably, a parallel move into the area of stakeholder engagement by practitioners, most notably by Daniel J. Edelman (2012) in their appointment of Alan VanderMolen, "a specialist in corporate communications, stakeholder relations, and corporate social responsibility" as vice chairman (Edelman, 2012), serves to help fulfil both environmental assessment and issue analysis. Scholars have long regarded stakeholder engagement as a core public relations function, with Grunig's (1992, 2001) excellence theory holding the dominant position for many years until more critical views pointed out the manipulative potential of engagement (see, for example, Berger, 2005; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Roper, 2005), although the fundamental need for engagement itself is not disputed.

At the same time, however, there continues to be a strong functional approach to the teaching of public relations students in tertiary education, with scant attention to critical perspectives, especially in association with issues of social, economic and environmental responsibility; politics – national and global; or indeed with any other such macro issues that are inexorably shaping our futures. Downing, Mohammadi, & Sreberny-Mohammadi (1995) describe a critical approach as involving "posing questions, including awkward and unpopular ones. . . not merely taking information for granted. . . but asking how and why these things come to be. . ." (p. xx). Such questions should be central to strategic planning and so should serve public relations ambitions to serve in that arena. Certainly, the call for a less functional and more social science based, critical approach that includes "increased scepticism and contestation of what constitutes 'truth'" (Weigel, James, & Gardner, 2009, p. 6), an ability to apply that to a synthesis of contextual information and to ask pertinent questions is heard broadly in relation to the education sector but seems not to be taken up by public relations educators. If the commonly heard educators' arguments

that functional skills continue to be the primary criteria for employment of their public relations graduates hold true, it would follow that the profession itself is similarly backward rather than forward thinking. It is telling that an online search readily provides lists of "top reads" for public relations practitioners, all of which offer functional tools for news releases, social media, reputation management, marketing and making presentations, amongst others.

A relatively recent, albeit still limited, wave of academic interest in and warnings of the need for public relations to address current and future uncertainties in organisational environments is emerging. Most significantly, McKie and Munshi (2007) and McKie (2010), in relation to the content of public relations textbooks, note the absence of attention to, or indeed in most cases even reference to, the study of futures, and certainly an absence of futures methodologies. In those instances where futures are mentioned, they continue to cling to the conventional thinking of the present (McKie, 2010). In noting Fiur's (1984) exceptional and visionary work, McKie also recommends scenarios planning and presents a more forward-looking framework for the public relations industry. He acknowledges Gilpin and Murphy (2008) in their attention to complexity in issues and crisis management, and their recommendation of scenario planning as part of a futures tool kit that allows managers to put aside assumptions and instead keep tuned to a rapidly changing environment with a range of possible responses to hand.

Of particular note here is that those few who have considered the relevance and importance of futures planning for public relations/communication management also consider its importance in the light of social wellbeing and the bleak significance of a future where individual interests are served at the expense of the collective. Van Ruler and Vercic (2005) note in their observance of the absence of society as a key factor in communication management that this absence is a clear sign of a misunderstanding and/or a lack of concern about the imperative of organisational legitimacy, an observation that should be heeded as a warning for an industry whose core business is arguably the protection of the legitimacy of clients. Legitimacy, by definition, rests upon societal approval.

3. Gardner, public relations and futures intelligence

Of Gardner's Five Minds, only one could be argued to align with current norms in public relations teaching and practice – and that is "disciplined". The disciplined mind is that which has mastered its specific trade, be that a scholarly discipline, a profession or any other similar field of endeavour. Mastery takes time, practice and honing of skills and the acquisition of mastery requires discipline. Without it, as Gardner suggests, "the individual is destined to march to someone else's tune" (2009, p. x). Public relations practitioners learn and practise the technical skills of designing and crafting messages, in a range of guises, for clients. Some reach mastery of those skills. It is these skills that our undergraduate courses tend to focus on, largely because, as noted above, we believe that these are the skills that future employers continue to demand.

Gardner's second mind, "synthesizing", pulls together and makes sense of diverse sources of information – a process that "becomes ever more crucial as information continues to mount at dizzying rates" (p. x). It is when such synthesizing of information is used to understand the local and global contexts in which we live and work that it could be said to approach the critical thinking that so many have called for over many years for public relations teaching and practice, as noted above. These contexts are social, cultural, political, environmental and/or economic. Within such contexts world views are formed, policy decisions lobbied for, and choices made. They help us understand the past that has shaped decisions, present influences and the future to the extent that they may help us understand trends.

The "creating mind" builds on the first two minds and, in Gardner's words, "breaks new ground" (p. x) by asking different sorts of questions and inspires new ways of thinking. This thinking is ahead of any established way of operating and so is not tied down to existing rules of operation. The current rapid rise in the application of design principles to what is now termed "design thinking" is reflective of the creating mind in that it takes the open and creative processes of design and applies them to organisational, including business, contexts such as problem solving and planning (see, for example, Best, 2010; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011; Martin, 2009). There is no documentation to date, however, that suggests design thinking is applied to public relations.

The "respectful" and the "ethical" minds move beyond individual insularity to recognition of others and others' needs in society. The respectful mind acknowledges differences and promotes tolerance and understanding. Indeed, intolerance is not acceptable. The ethical mind works on a more abstract and holistic level to consider societal needs. Thus it moves beyond self-interest to collective good. These two ways of thinking strongly resonate with current moves towards more environmentally, socially and culturally sustainable ways of living and of doing business.

In the broadly defined business literature, notions of and calls for sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) have reached the standing of a field in itself, as evidenced by the publication of handbooks on these topics (see, for example, Crane, McWilliams, Matten, Moon, & Siegel, 2008). In practise, business organisations are increasingly expected to engage with CSR issues, and to demonstrate that engagement through CSR/sustainability reporting (for example, Ihlen & Roper, 2014; KPMG International, 2014). However, motivations to engage in CSR or sustainability rest largely in what is commonly referred to as "the business case" – do well by doing good (for example, Benn, Dunphy, & Griffiths, 2014; Hart & Milstein, 2003; Willard, 2005), a perspective that emerges from self-interest rather than a desire for collective welfare. Thus, although the argument is frequently made that regardless of motivation, the outcomes are widely beneficial and stem from a renewed acceptance that societal wellbeing is necessary for organisational prosperity, it cannot be said that in such cases CSR is driven by a concern for collective welfare. Although it remains very much behind the broader business literature in this area, the public relations literature is increasingly featuring CSR and sustainability issues (see, for example, Bartlett, 2011; Benn, Todd,

& Pendleton, 2010; Kim & Reber, 2008; Roper, 2012). CSR and sustainability issues are a product of our increasingly complex and globalised societies. Understanding them requires a synthesising mind. However, truly values based approaches to these issues also require respectful and ethical minds, although evidence of these in organisational planning remains scant.

4. Education for futures intelligence

Gardner (2009) maintains that his five minds can be cultivated at school or elsewhere. Business schools worldwide are certainly increasingly committing themselves to curricula transformation to include the teaching of CSR and sustainability, and yet how well do these 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?

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, then what I term "futures intelligence", building on Gardner's five minds and adding a futurist dimension, may well provide a platform for change. In the following sections I discuss such a platform, moving from building critical awareness of environmental, economic, social and cultural issues that we face locally and globally to using scenario building to imagining possible futures that may or may not emerge from current conditions. In doing so, I describe and discuss the application of this platform for change through our teaching that aims to foster futures intelligence in our public relations students.

4.1. Global sustainability issues

In spite of a very few powerful individuals with vested interests who would have us believe that it is either not happening or is beyond human control, there is no question that we are already facing unprecedented dangers from climate change and that those dangers will escalate rapidly over the next few decades. The impacts from climate change will be local and global, and will be economic, social, environmental and cultural. The Stern Review (Stern, 2006), followed by the Garnaut Report (Garnaut, 2008), amongst others, gave clear warnings that the economic costs of ignoring global climate change would far outweigh the costs of mitigation through greenhouse reduction – in spite of cost having been long put forward as a compelling barrier to change. Sea level rise is already impacting low lying nations, in particular those small island states such as Tuvalu and Kiribati, where salinated groundwater makes traditional crop growing impossible and the sea is encroaching on culturally significant areas such as burial grounds. The people of these nations face futures as environmental refugees, along with many millions of people from other low lying areas such as delta plains or from areas where desertification will make life impossible. Extreme weather events, already increasingly frequent, are set to increase. As temperatures rise, insect borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, once geographically limited, will spread much more widely; oceans will acidify (a process already underway); biodiversity will diminish; and water will become an increasingly scarce commodity. This is by no means an exhaustive list. Each of these issues is a result of climate change, but there is a very large and growing range of other issues that have arisen independently of climate change, including issues of economic and social inequality that are products of our predominantly free-market economic system.

We have repeatedly found, over the past ten or more years, that our students remain, to a large extent, ignorant of such pressing issues and of how they will impact their futures. Further, even at post graduate level, we also find that relatively few students (including public relations students whose future careers should depend upon knowing what is going on) regularly read news, especially international news. While they may use the much vaunted social media, such as Facebook or Instagram, it is largely for connections amongst "friends" with much of the activity – think "selfie" – although shared, focused on reporting what the individual is doing, in line with research that questions the role of social media in public engagement (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). The individualisation of society is a direct and calculated result of a neo-liberal free-market economic system that now poses a significant challenge at a time when we need collaborative approaches to solving pressing global issues. It also points to a lack of Gardner's "synthesizing" mind, with its competence for critical understanding from diverse sources of information. Without this core competence there is little basis for developing respectful or ethical minds.

For these reasons, we have instigated a post graduate course that focuses first on building awareness of and knowledge about sustainability and CSR issues and then on creatively imagining how sustainability might impact on individuals and their society at large. The students are required to find current examples from around the world and discuss how the theory reflects reality [or not]. So far, however, this approach falls short of the creativity and forward thinking needed for futures intelligence. To move into this arena, we devote the second half of this particular course to the teaching and practise of scenario planning.

4.2. Scenarios

Scenarios offer a structured means for looking at the future. They build on what is known, but move well beyond to what might be imagined and it is this exploration of "what might be" and "what if" that gives scenario planning its value. It enables us to let go of the knowable, of the certainties, and even think the unthinkable. Without such imagination we run the risk of remaining totally unprepared for our increasingly unpredictable future. With it, we can begin to explore contingencies and develop long term strategies. In other words, scenario development provides a structured way in which to imagine future

contexts for decision making. It is not new; Shell provided the first publicly accessible examples of scenario development by a corporation for strategic planning in the 1970s and continued to use it for planning for decades afterwards (Shell, 2005).

There is a range of methods available for scenario development. The one we have used is based upon the intersection of two key variable driving forces presented as axes, creating a two by two matrix of four quadrants. Each of the axes is a continuum; for example, "no regulation" through to "full regulation". For each of the quadrants a scenario is built, depending on which of the driving forces are represented, typically looking from ten to fifty years ahead, rather than to the near future. These scenarios tell stories that highlight large-scale forces that push the future in different directions and make these forces visible and recognizable (Wilkinson, 2009).

The four scenario stories developed within a matrix diverge considerably from each other with each one modelling a feasible but distinct world in which we might someday find ourselves. Because each axis represents a continuum between two extremes, the corners of the matrix will represent the exaggerated, outer edges of what is plausible. None of the scenarios will present the "real" future; rather any future is likely to have elements of all scenarios. But predicting the real future is not the point. The point is to be better prepared for possibilities and to do this scenarios are used to create a strategy (or multiple strategies) that plays out well across several possible futures by understanding how different forces interact and how to plan for them.

Potential, and existing, applications of scenario planning are wide-reaching and include crisis management (such as civil defence) (Moats, Chermack, & Dooley, 2008; Pollard & Hotho, 2006), public policy making, communicating the complexity of scientific models, and long range planning for business. The medical field, mentioned earlier, is using scenario planning to imagine how academic medicine might become more relevant to the changing world (Clark, 2005).

4.3. The Waikato Management School student exercise

As outlined above, our students are introduced to the broad global and national political, environmental, social and economic context in which they live before moving on to scenario planning. In groups they then choose a topic around which they will build their future scenarios. The topics are necessarily broad, given the classroom situation. For example, they may focus on the issue of climate change, transport or education. Alternatively, they may be asked to focus on an organisation. The next step, which invariably proves to be the most difficult step, is choosing appropriate driving forces that will form the axes. If the two axes are too similar they cannot successfully be plotted against each other in a matrix. Typical examples of axes are government regulation – no regulation (free market) or collective – private (individual) as one axis, with the other representing the continuum between prioritization of "business as usual" through to innovation, or economic growth through to a sustainable lifestyle. The students are then asked to develop the future stories or scenarios that might represent the conditions produced by each of the four quadrants, as described above. They are also asked to identify the core elements of each scenario that they believe should be taken into account in strategic planning – and which actions they might recommend to foster a desirable future.

A noteworthy outcome of the scenario building exercise has been that in every case the most desirable scenarios, as judged by the students themselves, have been those that pay attention to the collective good for society. By contrast, individualistic approaches to issues have not been deemed to be either desirable or sustainable. It appears that when students become not only aware of but sensitive to issues beyond their individual lives, and the current or potential impacts of those issues on other people and society, they develop both a concern and an empathy for others that they had not even considered before. In effect, they are developing Gardner's five minds. When they apply these attributes to considering possible futures, we see a developing futures intelligence. Through building scenarios – stories of imagined but possible futures – the options are laid out starkly. Students can begin to see future consequences of actions taken or not taken today, and they are deciding that a focus on self-interest is not sustainable in the long term. They can also see new and hopeful possibilities laid out that not one student to date has not wanted to pursue. It is this empathetic, positive, forward thinking – futures intelligence – that we hope they will carry with them as future industry and societal leaders.

5. Conclusion

We do not know what we do not know, but at least imagining what we do not know is a start. If we are to imagine possible futures we need to take stock of what we do know, but then to be careful not to lock ourselves into the present. Scenarios planning offers a structured method for imagining, not predicting, a range of futures that are based on, for example, socially, politically, or environmentally based variables whose direction we cannot predict, but whose direction, if we could imagine, we just might be able to prepare for or even to shape. While not the specific focus of this paper, the type of questioning required for scenario planning also lends itself to design thinking, mentioned earlier, and its process of creative generation of alternative solutions to problems that begins with taking people into account. For this, futures intelligence provides valuable insight.

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. In doing so, 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. While there will most certainly be variables, such as natural disasters, that we can prepare for but cannot have influence over, others such as climate change and the range of possible political [in]actions to mitigate its worse effects, can serve as a vital basis for strategic futures planning.

In practical terms for public relations, in developing futures intelligence we are also creating a future for the industry that is central to organisational strategic planning, as has long been sought or claimed. Thus by 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.

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