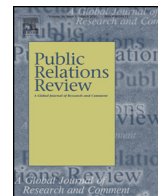




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## Public Relations Review



# Public relations strategic intelligence: Intelligence analysis, communication and influence

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### ABSTRACT

The article offers an approach to public relations from the perspective of intelligence collection and analysis. In a context of a superabundance of publicly available information on the general environment for organizations and their stakeholders, the article highlights the need for producing intelligence in order to facilitate the formulation of strategic communication and enhance relationship management activities. The literature on issues management and competitive intelligence is explored in order to analyze the relationships between their anticipatory practices and their points of convergence. The article proposes using the concepts of Intelligence-led PR and PR Intelligence for capturing and expressing two different but complementary dimensions of the relationship.

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## 1. Introduction

This article suggests that strategy formation, and specifically the communication component of business strategies, requires analytic inputs about the company environment and its stakeholders. It goes on to argue that adaptation of the organization's explicit plans to a dynamic and evolving context requires an intelligence function that anticipates and interprets developments, identifies drivers of change affecting the initial conditions, and informs management decisions and actions strategically.

It positions intelligence and analytic insights as prerequisites of strategy formulation, and strategic communication efforts. Although using the terms formation and formulation indistinguishably, the article acknowledges Mintzberg (1978) identification of the conceptual difference between both terms. Accordingly, strategies can be formulated through a conscious process "in advance of the making specific decisions" (Mintzberg, 1978p. 934). This process can result in a deliberate plan or set of guidelines to underlie the posterior actions, or they can be "patterns in a stream of decisions", i.e., realized strategies that emerge and form "when a sequence of decisions in some area exhibits a consistency over time" (Mintzberg, 1978pp. 934–935). The article claims that deliberate strategic plans, rather than being a mere collection of intuitions, require intelligence on the organization's environment.

This intelligence is necessary to capture a thoughtful organizational response to changing conditions and to address challenges from the environment or from stakeholders. In addition, the adaptation of the organization's plans to a dynamic

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and evolving context requires an intelligence function to interpret developments, identify drivers of change, and inform management decisions and actions that will lead to new strategies.

Organizations of all kinds, as well as governments, require strategic information in order to support their decision making processes in all spheres. More specifically, business and public institutions need foreknowledge, as well as knowledge in order to plan, execute, and evaluate their communication campaigns. Listening, capturing and communicating the attitudes and opinions of publics toward organizations are commonly recognized activities of the PR function. When conducted under an anticipatory logic, PR can detect problems early as well as point out opportunities for business, non-profits, and governmental agencies.

The purpose of this article is to explore how intelligence—conceived as a corporate function and a management process consisting of the legal, ethical and systematic collection, analysis, interpretation, and timely communication of relevant information to internal clients and other intelligence consumers for facilitating their decision making processes—can contribute to the practice of PR and strategic communication by enabling a superior relationship management capability through such strategic information and analysis that might result in a competitive advantage.

## 2. Definitions and literature review

As with other concepts, defining strategic communication is challenging and entails considerable debate (Paul, 2011p. 3). This might be in part due to the different nature and dimension of organizations, institutions, and groups that develop strategic communication activities. At a government level, the US National Framework for Strategic Communication defines “strategic communication(s)” as:

the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals. (White House, 2010p. 2)

Analogously, Paul (2011) defines strategic communication as “coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives” (p. 3); and Farwell (2012) calls it “the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behavior in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives” (pp. xviii–xix).

On the other hand, at the level of organizations, strategic communication has been defined as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to advance its mission (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, pp. 3–4). Hallahan et al. (2007) add that strategic communication practices in organizations include: management communication, marketing and advertising, public relations, technical communication, political communication as well as social marketing (pp. 5–7).

Aguilar’s (1967) definition of strategic information usefully adds that this is “information useful for making decisions about strategy and long-range plans” and there is not information that is intrinsically strategic but that categorization depends on whether the information “relates to a strategic opportunity or problem” or not (pp. 5–6). Freeman (1984) identifies consistent factors in the definition in his view that “strategic decisions are intentional actions which are designed to exert some measure of control over the future (and the present) state of the corporation” (p. 86).

The article also concurs with Steyn’s (2007) formulation of Strategic PR/Communication as a management function that works at the strategic level of the organization managing the communication between the organization/institution and its stakeholders. It does this by: developing deliberate PR strategy aligned to the strategic goals of the organization, as well as emergent PR Strategy addressing constantly stakeholder and societal issues; formulating a strategic PR plan; “developing, implementing, and evaluating communication plans in support of the PR function’s deliberate and emergent strategies”; providing counsel to top management on communication with employees; and managing activities of a support function at the different levels at the organization, and for other functions such as marketing (Steyn, 2007pp. 138–140). Steyn’s (2007) differentiation between deliberate PR strategy and emergent PR strategy is consistent with Mintzberg’s (1978, 1987a, 1987b) distinction mentioned above in the previous section between intended and realized strategies.

From the perspective of this article, although (Grunig, 1992, p.6) asserts two-way symmetrical assumptions are key for excellence and long-range organizational effectiveness, intelligence for decision support can be a common characteristic of both symmetrical public relations and asymmetric communication management programs.

The article supports the view of that “excellent public relations departments do environmental scanning for their organizations” and that the top public relations manager “must be part of the dominant coalition, function at a high level of decision making, and participate in strategic management” (White & Dozier, 1992, p. 91). Grunig and Repper (1992) similarly claim that public relations must be part of the strategic management of the total organization by monitoring the environment and helping in the definition of its mission, goals and, objectives, especially since this involvement in the whole process “provides direction to public relations from the corporate/organizational level” and also PR should manage strategically its own programs (1992, pp. 119–120).

It is, however, important to remember that strategy decisions occur at different levels: enterprise, corporate, business, and functional level (Freeman, 1984; Carroll and Buchholtz, 2014; Steyn, 2007). As Freeman (1984) observes, enterprise-level strategy is concerned with addressing the question “what do we stand for?” or understanding the role of a particular company in society and how it is perceived by stakeholders (pp. 89–91); while corporate-level strategy can be assimilated

to the responsibility of top-management for the financial performance of the firm (Steyn, 2007pp. 154–155) or to addressing the questions “in what business(es) should we be in” (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014p. 129) as well as “what businesses do we want to be in” or should we be in (Freeman, 1984p. 88).

### 3. The PR process, vigilant problem solving and the intelligence cycle

According to PRSA's Public Statement on Public Relations (1982), PR as a management function comprises, among other activities, the following ones:

Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues that might impact, for good or ill, the operations and plans of the organization. Counseling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decisions, courses of action and communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organization's social or citizenship responsibilities. Researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims. These may include marketing, financial, fund raising, employee, community or government relations and other programs. Planning and implementing the organization's efforts to influence or change public policy. (PRSA, 1982)

On the other hand, PR is frequently conceptualized as a systematic cyclical process sometimes described as RACE (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation), ROPE (Research, Objectives, Programming, Evaluation) or RPIE (Research, Planning, Implementation, Evaluation). Thus, research and analysis are recognized activities or components of PR, so the idea that knowledge is needed for the design and implementation of communication campaigns is a consolidated principle (Stacks, 2011p. 6). According to Cutlip and Center (1988), “research provides useful intelligence” as a “central source of information on the organization, the public's image, the industry or field, and the social, economic, and political trends” (Cutlip & Center, 1988p. 113). For instance, lobbying activities – as suggested by Sam Black (1998) – should be based on reliable intelligence about legislation developments and such intelligence has to be provided at an early stage, offering a timely foundation for defining the communication strategy and the key messages. Broom and Sha (2013) similarly stress the importance of intelligence for PR when affirming that: “each step is as important as the others, but the process begins with gathering intelligence to diagnose the problem. Information and understanding developed in the first step motivate and guide subsequent steps in the process” (p. 239).

Similarly, Stein (2007) conceptualizes the “PR Strategist” as one who not only “gathers information regarding stakeholders concerns and expectations, identifies societal issues and the publics that arise around issues, interprets the information with respect to consequences for organizational strategies (pointing out reputation risks and other strategic issues)” (p. 141) but “feeds intelligence into the enterprise and/or other organizational strategies” (p. 141) (see also Steyn & Niemann, 2014).

Consistencies can also be found between Cutlip & Center's (1988) four-step PR process and Janis' (1989) vigilant problem-solving approach. Which also consists of four steps: (1) formulating the problem; (2) using informational resources; (3) analyzing and reformulating; (4) evaluating and selecting (alternatives) (p. 91). According to Janis (1989), the model: “describes what executives can do within the confines of incomplete knowledge, unresolvable uncertainties, limited capacity to process information, and all other usual constraints, which can hamper sound thinking about the generally ill-defined problems that require policy decision” (p. 90).

Intelligence reports and inputs from experts constitute resources to be used in step two. Indeed, the quality of the decision making process both for policy making and business management, can be judged by using a list of indicators. Janis (1989) list these as: the decision maker surveys a range of objectives; examines alternative courses of action; intensively searches for relevant information; processes information correctly, including unsupportive inputs; reconsiders the originally unaccepted alternatives; examines costs and risks of chosen alternatives; makes provisions for implementation, monitoring, and contingency plans (pp. 30–31).

In line with these other organizational aspects – decision-making, action implementation and evaluation in PR – require to be fed with intelligence. Traditionally intelligence is conceptualized as a systematic cyclical process encompassing: definition of requirements and planning; information collection; analysis; communication; and feedback. Competitive/Business Intelligence, Marketing Intelligence are terms used frequently in an interchangeable manner when conceptualizing the practice of intelligence in business and the corporate world.

Information collected from primary and secondary sources is evaluated considering the reliability of the source and the credibility of the content. Intelligence is produced after the raw data and information resulting from research is evaluated, analyzed, and interpreted. The result is communicated to intelligence consumers in a digestible and actionable manner by the means of a range of deliverables and briefings. In Competitive Intelligence, intelligence reports also include recommendations.

Whether intelligence is conducted by a centralized corporate department or through decentralized agents, it requires to be developed as a capability of the organization. It is vital to be future oriented and this intelligence is not just focused on what is happening now but must be forward-looking and seek to anticipate the external environment of the organization, the implications of decisions and developments in the market for the future of the organization and the drivers that are affecting a given situation. The intelligence function analyzes the external environment and extracts conclusions and implications

**Table 1**

| Chase/Jones issue management process model | Renfro's issue management process model  | Heath/Palenchar strategic issues management | Affleck's radarscan issues management |
|--|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| Issue identification                       | Identifying emerging issues: environmental scanning (internal and external sources)  | Issues scanning                             | Soul                                  |
| Issue analysis                             | Researching background, future and potential impacts of issues   | Issues identification                       | Scan                                  |
| Issue change strategy options              | Issue evaluation competing for anticipatory operations and actions programs (assessment – judgments involving senior management) | Issues trend monitoring                     | Analyze                               |
| Issue action programming                   | Developing strategies for anticipatory operations  | Issue analysis                              | Strategy                              |
| Evaluation of results                      | Implementation, oversight and review   | Issue priority setting                      | Action                                |
|  |  |   | Review                                |

Source: Author summary based on Chase (1984); Renfro (1993); Heath/Palenchar (2009), and Affleck (1998).

upon which the decision maker can act. Intelligence provides a perspective on the market components and on the different dimensions of the environment that affect, or might affect – whether positive or negative – the organization.

**4. Environmental scanning, issues management and competitive intelligence**

Anticipatory approaches to PR relate clearly to the management of public policy issues, public affairs and lobbying. The links between issues management and public relations have been addressed in the public relations literature. Heath and Palenchar (2009, p. 11), for example, note that, in some cases, issues management has been subordinated to public relations, while other authors understand issues management as a managerial function rather than a PR technical function. For Jaques (2014) too, “issue management is not just an activity for public relations and communication professionals” and “effective issue management requires the involvement and support of leaders and top executives across many functions” (pp. 7–8).

The Table 1 describes the steps in issues management according to models by Chase/Jones (1984), Renfro (1993), Heath and Palenchar (2009) and Affleck (1998).

In contrast to issues management, the intelligence process or cycle described above finishes where the decision begins. Findings and judgments from information collection and analysis provide the basis for the definition of strategies, and also for evaluation or review of the actions developed. According to Aguilar (1967), “scanning is the activity of acquiring information” (p. 1) and environmental scanning is focused on the recognition, search, and internal reporting of external information, rather than on the analysis and interpretation of that information (pp. 16–17).

Consistent with this view, Renfro's issues management process distinguished between scanning, on the one hand, and researching issues on the other. Analysis, interpretation and communication components of the intelligence function are part of these stages. As stated by Renfro (1993), “the preliminary researching stage is a process of intelligence gathering, defining, and educating” (p. 78). Renfro (1993) continues that the process produces specific intelligence products like papers and issues briefs that are provided to senior management responsible for selecting and implanting strategies: “Issues management is an intelligence function that does not get involved in the ‘operations side’ unless specifically directed to do so” (p. 89).

Environmental scanning has also been described as a component of macroenvironmental analysis or environmental analysis, which is consistent with the idea that scanning and data/information collection are different ways to name the same activity. Macroenvironment stands for the overall environment outside a given industry and the organizations within that industry and is composed of several dimensions or segments (Fahey & Narayanan, 1986). Analysis of the macroenvironment is key for the corporate decision making process.

Fahey and Narayanan (1986) further observe that environmental analysis should provide: (1) understanding of current and potential changes in the environment; (2) intelligence for corporate strategic decision makers; and (3) challenge the organization views and fostering strategic thinking (pp. 3–4). The framework provided by these authors classifies the environment under three levels of analysis: task environment or that immediate part of the environment that relates to the organization on a quasi daily basis (including suppliers, customers, competitors, and other specific stakeholders); the competitive or industry environment as conceptualized by Michael Porter five forces framework (1980); and finally the general environment which their social, technological, economic, and political segments (p. 25). Environmental analysis is conceived, according to this view, as a process than entails the activities of scanning, monitoring, forecasting, and assessing (p. 36).

Baron's (1995a, 1995b) formulation of integrated business strategy as a sum of market and nonmarket components is underpinned by the same, or by a similar framework. As Baron (1995b) put it about two decades ago:

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**Table 2**

| IA (1)  | IA (2)                            | IA (3)   |
|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| What is the Issue?<br>“It is not just a matter of neutralizing threats but also recognizing issues whose favorable resolution would generate a new opportunity” | What are actor’s Interests?       | What Information moves the issue in this arena?          |
| Who are the Actors?<br>“Identifying actors who care about the issue, which are generally those with an economic or ideological stake in the issue”              | In what Arena do the actors meet? | What Assets do the actors need to prevail in this arena? |

Source: Adapted from [Bach and Allen \(2010, pp. 42–43\)](#).

The nonmarket environment consists of the social, political, and legal arrangements that structure the firm’s interaction outside of, and in conjunction with, markets. The nonmarket environment is characterized by four I’s: issues, institutions, interest and information. Issues are what nonmarket strategies address [ . . . ] Interest are individuals and groups with preferences about, or a stake in, an issue [ . . . ] Information pertains what the interested parties know or believed about the relation between actions and consequences and about the preferences and capabilities of the interested parties. (p. 2)

Built on Baron’s Four-I’s framework, Bach and Allen’s (IA)<sup>3</sup> framework provides a basis for nonmarket environmental analysis of the issues affecting companies. Unlike stakeholder analysis, the focus of (IA)<sup>3</sup> is on issues ([Table 2](#)).

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 use in Competitive Intelligence (See [Fleisher & Bensoussan, 2003](#)). [Fleisher \(1999\)](#) has proposed the concept 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). Fleisher uses also the term Public Affairs Competitive Intelligence for referring to the same concept ([Fleisher, 2013](#)).

From our standpoint, an intelligence function for the global practice of PR is needed. The concept of intelligence includes the systematic scanning or collection of environmental information, research, analysis, and communication of strategic information to decision makers. A proactive approach based on a strategic analysis and warning system and able to provide knowledge and foreknowledge for the overall practice of PR is desirable. It can include not just public affairs and lobbying as public relations specialties, but also others such as customer relations, investors relations/financial communications, community relations, or crisis and risk communications.

As noted by [Coombs \(2012\)](#), the best way to manage crisis is to prevent them though proactive approaches and this entails establishing a system able to detect early signals and provide warning. However the focus tends to be put on early detection of threats, and not so much on opportunities. In any case, collection of information and analysis for taking decisions and action is part of the crisis prevention process (See: [Coombs, 2012](#))

Intelligence programs use some of the following frameworks, collection and analytic techniques for reducing uncertainty and facilitating the decision:

- Key Intelligence Topics and Key Performance Indicators
- Human Intelligence/Primary sources
- Secondary research through open sources
- Trade Show and event intelligence
- Elicitation techniques
- Social Media Monitoring
- Industry analysis
- Competitor Profiling
- Environmental analysis
- Issue analysis
- Stakeholder analysis
- Networks analysis
- Analysis of Competing Hypothesis
- Key Assumptions Check
- Warning and indications Intelligence
- Scenario analysis
- What if analysis
- Invented Competitors
- Simulations and Business Wargames

- Counterintelligence

PR professionals, as well as sales professionals, are particularly well positioned – given their proximity to customers and other stakeholders – for gathering human intelligence (Fleisher, 1999; Le Bon, 2013). For the same reason, these departments should be key intelligence consumers and suppliers.

## 5. PR Intelligence as a component of competitive intelligence

The concepts of Intelligence-led PR and PR Intelligence try to highlight the need for strategic information, analytic insights and anticipatory approaches through analysis and intelligence capabilities for taking decisions in the domain of communication and managing relationships with key stakeholders and publics. Additionally, they provide a way to expand the anticipatory approach of issues management beyond the sphere of public issues to other PR practices such as investor relations, community relations, marketing communications, reputation management, fundraising, and global communications.

Intelligence-led PR as a concept stresses how public relations can benefit from the intelligence support to strategic planning, implementation and evaluation of PR campaigns; PR Intelligence, on the other hand, expresses the need for specific expert knowledge and intelligence on strategic communication and relationship management as a component of intelligence together with market intelligence, competitor intelligence, customer insights, business intelligence, and others segments. This approach assumes what Bulger (2014) has designated as the integrated intelligence model or framework:

even in small companies a new trend is emerging rapidly. Certain fields - for example, business strategy, marketing, and finance, - are a subset of disciplines which continuously take advantage of intelligence support, partnership and outputs [ . . . ] In order to understand the trends and dynamics your particular marketplace faces, you need to look beyond that data and beyond the requirements of your own discipline to understand the true overall competitive landscape and engage in the development of analytics that supports this across disciplines and brings all aspects of intelligence.

Communication is growing in importance as a dimension of the environment that requires attention for companies and organizations of all kinds. It is a component of the overall corporate strategy that needs analysis and insights for planning and implementing programs, as well as an instrument of prevention of further conflicts that might affect organizations and their stakeholders. Communication represents also the influence dimension of intelligence. This aspect of intelligence refers here to activities that are conducted in a legal and ethical manner, overtly, and transparently serving the public good while representing the interest of the organizations. Communication, as suggested by Xifra (2009), can adopt a proactive mode for managing the environment for the interest of the organization. When it is used to strategize, communication needs intelligence, early warnings, and environmental perspectives in order to be effective. Accordingly, the collection of information and analysis are key for the success of PR campaigns (Arcos, 2013).

## 6. Conclusion

PR as a strategic communication process requires intelligence to be, or become, strategic. Intelligence provides the basis for knowing, understanding, and explaining what is happening and is likely to happen regarding the environment of an organization and its stakeholders through tailored outputs that incorporate implications for the organizations. The superabundance of information and the massive data available from open sources, as well as through internal sources, whether tacit or explicit, require an intelligence capability, function or program to avoid overload, distill what is relevant for the organization and provide focus or perspective. In the context of an information society, information overload and digital communication, organizations need intelligence for managing their environment and their relationships.

Issues management serves traditionally as the intelligence function for organizations and is mainly focused on managing public policy issues. The concept of intelligence conveys a more neutral meaning and refers to a process that finished where the decision begins. Intelligence integrates information collection and research activities in a systematic and planned manner resulting from identifying the intelligence needs of top management and translating them into intelligence requirements. Analysis and production are critical steps in the process of transforming information into actionable insights that incorporate implications for the organization. Although qualitative in nature, there is trend for measurement and evaluation of intelligence.

There are specific areas for synergies that require further exploration such as structured analysis, foresight, estimative intelligence and communication of uncertainty in analytic judgments. Indications and warning intelligence techniques seems an area of interest for establishing a research agenda for the practice of strategic PR. On the other hand, intelligence services, like any organizations and institutions, require strategic managing of the communication and relationships with their stakeholders and have to explain their mission and functions. This aspect also deserves further exploration from the perspective of strategic PR/communication management, including their relationships with think tanks in the different categories (see Xifra, 2005) and other non-Intelligence Community stakeholders through educational and analytic outreach initiatives.

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