Excellence Theory in Public Relations: Past, Present, and Future

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The programme of research known as the excellence theory began in the 1960s with J. Grunig’s research on publics found among Colombian farmers. Research then followed on the role of public relations in organizational decision-making, the symmetrical model of public relations, public relations measurement, and how the structure and environment of organizations shape public relations behaviour. The IABC excellence project added theories of public relations roles, operations research, and gender and diversity to the paradigm. The excellence theory has evolved into a general theory of public relations as a strategic management function, and ongoing research now is adding concepts and tools that public relations professionals who serve in a strategic role can use.

1 Introduction

The “excellence theory” is the name our colleagues and we gave to an integrated collection of middle-range theories that we used in a 15-years’ study sponsored by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation. These integrated theories, developed in the 1970s and 1980s, helped us to explain the value of public relations to an organization and to identify the characteristics of a public relations function that increase its value (J. Grunig, 1992b; Dozier with L. Grunig & J. Grunig, 1994; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Our use of the term “excellence” often has been misunderstood or misinterpreted (e.g., by McKie, 2001) as an iconic term that no one “could rationally oppose” (p. 76) or an imperialistic term suggesting that our theories were better than those of others.

In actuality, we chose the term “excellence” quite innocently during a research-planning meeting with board members of the IABC Research Foundation in 1984. At the time, Peters and Waterman’s (1982) book In Search of Excellence had sold more than 5 million copies in 16 languages; and one board member suggested that the research we were about to conduct had a similar purpose. Everyone at the meeting agreed that we were searching for excellence in public relations and communication management, but we dropped the words “in search of” from the name of the study to avoid copying Peters and Waterman’s title.

Peters and Waterman (1982) conducted their research to identify characteristics of management in companies they described as excellent. They defined “excellence” as having been continuously profitable. Peters and Waterman studied 43 continuously profitable companies and identified eight attributes of management that these companies shared. Peters and Waterman were not the only management scholars at the time to use the term “excellence” or something similar to develop indicators of best practices in management.
J. Grunig (1992d) reviewed this literature on excellence as part of our broad literature review for the study and identified 12 managerial and organizational attributes of excellence that were related to public relations. We followed Peters and Waterman’s example of searching for best practices in our excellence study, although we defined excellence differently and conducted large-scale survey research along with qualitative interviews rather than case studies, as they did. We defined excellence as a set of characteristics of a public relations function that were correlated with organizational effectiveness. We defined organizational effectiveness as occurring when an organization achieves goals chosen in consultation with stakeholders – goals that served the interests of both the organization and these strategic constituencies. We defined excellence in public relations as a set of attributes and practices that helped to “build quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies” (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992, p. 86).

We chose the term “excellence” not to suggest the superiority of our theory or its universal acceptance. Rather, we chose the term because it was fashionable; and it placed our research in the mainstream of management research. Instead of “excellence,” we could have used terms such as “best practices in public relations;” “benchmarking public relations practices;” or, descriptively but blandly, “characteristics of an organization’s public relations function that contribute to organizational effectiveness.”

To understand the excellence theory, it helps to place it into the research context that preceded it. Before the 1970s, few theories of public relations went beyond the descriptions of the practice found in classic textbooks such as Cutlip and Center’s (1952) first edition. These textbook descriptions could not be considered theories because they were based on anecdotal examples rather than systematic research designed to gather evidence to support and revise theory. Nevertheless, these textbook descriptions provided a framework for our understanding of public relations that guided the research that preceded the excellence study as well as the excellence study itself (see J. Grunig, 1991, for an analysis of Cutlip’s influence on the discipline).

When J. Grunig began doing public relations research in 1966, he was guided by the descriptions of public relations practice and the normative prescriptions for improving it found in Cutlip and Center’s (1964) textbook. At the time, the little public relations research that existed was based on mass communication theories of media effects, attitude theories from social psychology (e.g., Lerbinger, 1972; Robinson, 1966), or highly practical research such as the characteristics of press releases most often used by editors. Most researchers then did not try to explain or criticize the behaviour of public relations practitioners. They accepted the work of practitioners as given and looked for ways to identify the effects of public relations work or to find ways to improve the effectiveness of public relations techniques (see J. Grunig and Hickson, 1976, for a review of this early research).

Few scholars asked, for example, what a public was or how the characteristics of an organization influenced how public relations practitioners behaved. J. Grunig (1966) began to construct the conceptualization that he now calls the situational theory of publics; and J. Grunig (1976) used organizational theory to identify how an organization’s structure, environment, history, size, and technology affect the practice of public relations – research that eventually produced his four models of public relations (e.g., J. Grunig, 2001) and explained why organizations practice one or more of these models rather than others.

Shortly after, Broom (e.g., Broom & Smith, 1978, 1979) and later Dozier (e.g., Dozier, 1984) began a programme of research on the roles of public relations practitioners; Ehling

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