CIPR ADVANCED CERTIFICATE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS
CRITICAL REASONING TEST

ASSIGNMENT COVER SHEET

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Please indicate which **two** questions you have answered | Put your word count for the **two** answered questions

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This cover sheet may be different to the one provided by the CIPR. This is because PR Academy only accepts assignments submitted electronically.

Would you be happy for your assignment to be used anonymously as an example for other students?

YES
1. **Evaluate how far Grunig & Hunt’s four models of public relations remain relevant to contemporary practice.**

I argue four reasons for a continued practical relevance: practical agility, continuous improvement, impact evaluation and understanding social media developments.

The four models have influenced debate since 1984. They present distinct approaches to practice which Grunig & Hunt suggest can be normative and positive. They comprise one-way communication: ‘press agentry’ and ‘public information’, and two-way: ‘asymmetric’ and ‘symmetric’ (Theaker & Yaxley 2013, p29-30).

The models describe communication flows and relationships between an organisation and its publics. ‘Press agentry’ emphasises publicity which may be mediated by the press. Davis related it to propaganda and “there being little respect for truth” (Davis 2007, p82). ‘Public information’ may disseminate whole or partial truth based on facts, and may also be propagandist. To Grunig & Hunt, feedback or engagement is absent or limited in ‘one-way’ models. ‘Asymmetrical communication’ is two-way with the balance of power resting with one organisation over others. Although it may normally be organisation over publics, Karlberg (1996) considered ‘activist’ asymmetrical communication (Grunig, 2001 p8). ‘Two-way asymmetric’ is characterised by ‘persuasion’ (Watson & Hill 2012, p120). ‘Two-way symmetrical’ “…allows the organisation to understand the public’s opinion” through and negotiation (Dwyer 2013, p284).

The spectrum of debate includes Sha who perceived the models an historical chronology with ‘two-way symmetrical communication’ reflecting contemporary PR (2007, p6); Dwyer who argued only one of the models is normally applied in practice (2013, p285); and Pleczka (1996) and Moloney (2000 & 2006), cited by Johanna Fawkes, who viewed application of all four models as a rarity (Fawkes 2015, p16).
In 2001, James Grunig sought to clarify and reclaim the debate, by asserting each model was in evidence in contemporary PR practice (Grunig 2001). Although his ‘Excellence study’ - a large scale longitudinal survey rating the relative value of PR approaches – presented symmetrical communication as best practice (Davis 2007, p84-87). Grunig also set out the ‘contingency model’, arguing that certain conditions lent themselves to certain of the models (Grunig 2001, p1), and a “mixed motive” approach where a combinations of asymmetrical and symmetrical could build “trust” and “understanding” (Grunig 2001, p10). His refined symmetrical communication - the “convergence model” recognised a negotiated mix of symmetry and asymmetry may best achieve a “win-win” for organisations and publics (Grunig 2001, p14).

I argue that the four models, including the subsequent adaptations, remain practically relevant for four key reasons. Firstly, they demonstrate the varied reality of PR practice that is a combination of input (messages and channels) and output (products and outcomes) variables. Larissa Grunig commented in a 2010 lecture that the “Excellence Theory is not static” (Grunig & Grunig 2010, p1). For example, public information (one-way) continues to be a visible part of communication activity: Public Health England in 2013-14 planned to deliver five information campaigns for behaviour change¹, including on smoking cessation, over 50’s health, and early years at a total cost of £40.5m² (Public Health England 2013). Despite the growth in social media, the press continues make a visible contribution to PR practice. A study by Howes and Sallot argued benefits from press coverage remain because they engender trust, although there is growing press distrust, and “a multifaceted approach to communication will continue to produce the most successful and effective results” (Howes & Sallot 2014, p12). The CIPR’s ‘State of the Profession Survey’ 2013/14 provided a snapshot of contemporary PR practice. An average of 74% of respondents engaged in media relations³, the

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¹ A sixth campaign is an innovation pilot programme.
² Cost calculated based on individual cost of 5 marketing campaigns set out on pages 16-24 of PHE Marketing Plan 2013-14.
³ 74% freelance, 78% consultancy, 70% in-house respondents.
second most dominant responsibility (CIPR 2014a, p9) that also utilised the highest budget spend (CIPR 2014a, p15).

However, Sha states that because of ‘complexity’ and ‘malleability’ of relationships, “classic public relations models can no longer describe...practice” (Sha 2007, p3). Fawkes argues that symmetrical communication “refused to acknowledge PR’s role in propaganda” (Fawkes 2015, p16). L’Etang (2008, p41) sees persuasion as part of PR, and Grunig quotes her as seeing PR as “partisan” (Grunig 2001, p6). This suggests inherent imbalance in organisation-public relationships that may be narrowed, but not overcome, by PR. Dickinson argues that Grunig’s ‘two-way asymmetric’ model was based on a flawed understanding of persuasion, as always ‘irrational’ which unnecessarily discredited this approach to PR in favour of ‘symmetry’ (2012). Although, Grunig’s “convergence” and “mixed motive” arguably seeks to reconcile the advantages of asymmetry and symmetry where they can achieve organisational objectives. In this sense, Grunig hasn’t positioned asymmetry as value-less.

I argue the models enable an agile conceptual reference point for understanding what PR is and does. This is because PR is inherently varied in tasks, objectives and potential impacts in the same way organisational objectives are varied and context and value specific.

Secondly, the four models promote continuous improvement in PR. Fawkes suggests symmetrical communication is “an elevated ideal” (Fawkes 2015, p18) and Grunig admits it is “an ideal type” (Grunig 2001, p1). Yet practitioners have gained recognition for demonstrating features of the ‘two-way symmetrical’ model. The Royal College of Physicians of London won the CIPR’s Best Public Sector Campaign 2014 Excellence Award for combining stakeholder relations, behaviour change and impact evaluation, in their ‘Launch of ‘Future Hospital: caring for medical patients’ report (CIPR 2014b).
Nevertheless, Hodges and McGrath viewed symmetrical communication as not real dialogue, rather “manipulation dressed up as paternalism” (2011, p92). Heath considered organisations may still need to ‘obtain agreement, repair relations, and have a clear organisational voice’, implying pursuit of symmetry may prevent PR objectives being fulfilled (Heath 2000, p33). Fawkes argued that ‘symmetrical communication is achievable only if “power” and “politics” are removed’ (2015, p17). These criticisms suggest that symmetry is unrealistic while delivery of fixed organisational objectives is the desired outcome.

I argue debating the value of the models has pushed some PR practice into a more symmetrical domain. This includes stakeholder relations, dialogue, flexibility and impact evaluation, to shape best practice. It has enabled professional self-reflection and provides potential to benchmark. It is clear to see how recent annual profession surveys conducted by the CIPR has been informed by the ‘Excellence project’, for example considering board room representation or the place of women in senior PR.

Thirdly, the emphasis on two-way asymmetrical and symmetrical communication promotes PR evaluation by relating PR to organisational strategic impact. Tom Watson quotes Cutlip, Center & Broom (1994) as seeing evaluation as a “systematic measure of programme effectiveness” (Watson 2000, p260). MacNamara’s ‘macro model’ (1992) advocates evaluating quality, output and results of PR activity and Lindenmann’s ‘Yardstick model’ (1993) involves setting PR objectives followed by measuring ‘output, outgrowth (receipt), and outcomes’ (Watson 2000, p265). In 2010, an international PR alliance developed the ‘Barcelona Declaration’ comprising seven evaluation measurement principles, including measuring communication outcomes and quality (AMEC 2010).

Yet, PR evaluation is seen as qualitatively challenging or conceptually unnecessary. Dozier (1985) saw output measurement as “pseudo-evaluation” (Watson 2000, p260). The ‘2014 CIPR State of the Profession Survey’ found 22% of respondents thought ‘lack of understanding of measurement and evaluation’ presented a future challenge (CIPR 2014, p19) and although an average of 57% of
respondents did this activity (2014, p9) only 4.5% of the PR budget was spent on research, planning and evaluation (2014, p15).

I argue that the concept of impact evaluation pushes PR to question what it has achieved. This is inherent in Grunig’s work where PR is about change and benefit in the context of organisational objectives.

Finally, the four models have provided a framework to consider impact of social media on PR. Larissa Grunig argues that social media makes symmetrical communication more possible (Grunig & Grunig 2010, p3) as organisations ‘listen’ more (Grunig & Grunig 2010, p3). Jim Grunig agrees, saying “publics are opinion-controlled” making communication management harder (Grunig & Grunig 2010, p10 &11). Demetrious discusses “power shifts” cause by social/digital media (2011, p119).

However, Phillips & Brabham (2012) contend that digital media has brought about a new model that “locates power very much in the hands of participants in online communities rather than in the organisational hierarchy or the public relations practitioner” (2012 p1). They critique the four models approach, arguing although ‘two-way symmetrical’ closes the gap between organisations and publics, the digital reality is a removal of boundaries create “an organic whole” (Phillips & Brabham 2012, p2).

I would argue that without the four models as a baseline framework it would be challenging to situate and refocus the conceptual lens on social media, demonstrated by a need to justify any new model in the face of Grunig and Hunt’s approach. In Phillips & Brabham’s discussion of PR in the digital age suggested contemporary models are presented in relation to Grunig and Hunt’s work (2012).

In conclusion, the four models remain relevant because they provide a conceptual framework to understand, critique and challenge PR practice. The discourse on the models have demonstrated their practical agility in the face of the varied and evolving nature of practice. Despite academic
contention or conviction, the models have pushed PR towards continuous improvement in pursuit of ‘symmetry’, including towards impact evaluation, and have been able to withstand contemporary developments such as social media.

Word count: 1529

References


4. In a public relations context, analyse the assertion that: ‘The myth of communication suggests that sending a message is the same as communicating a message. In essence, dissemination is confused with communication’. (Broom & Sha 2013:192)

Broom and Sha imply that conveying and communicating a message are not the same, but are mistakenly given equal status by commentators and PR practitioners. I contrast communication models and potential effects of message dissemination to consider whether there is an equivalence ‘myth’. I argue that it is dependent on the purposes of communication, but conclude that dissemination alone cannot optimise beneficial PR outcomes.

There are a range of models explaining communication in the context of PR. Davis (2007), Narula (2006) and Heath (2000), among others, consider communication theories, including Lasswell’s communication model (1948), Westley & MacLean’s ‘gatekeeper’ (1957) and Grunig & Hunt’s four models (1984 & 1992), to develop meta-theories of communication. Such perspectives include chronology of conceptual development from ‘linear’ to ‘circular’ communication (Narula 2006); extent of organisational control over, or interdependence with, stakeholders (Cornelison 2014); or extent of communication impact evaluation (Watson 2000). This suggests that what communication is, does and aims to achieve may depend on variables such as historical time, context, and purpose.

Some early models convey a ‘linear’ approach (Narula 2006) to communication. Lasswell’s 1948 model comprised ‘who – says what – via which channel – to whom – with what effect’ (Narula 2006, p25). Although the aim was “persuasion”, the effect was inherently uncertain (Steinberg 2007, p53). Kincaid (1977) saw linear models of communication as limited by being ‘one-way, uncontextualised, dependent, message-focused and persuasive’ (Narula 2006, p13). Grunig and Hunt’s concept of ‘one-way communication’ reflects a similar imbalance towards the message and the means: ‘press agentry’ with publicity as the aim, and ‘public information’ where facts may be incomplete or skewed. I would argue communication practised according to such models contains uncertainty due to emphasis on message and communication channels – the dissemination factors, rather than the
effect. Here the communication agent – such as PR counsel, takes a functional and technical role (Moss & Warnaby 1997, p60).

Motion (1997) considered that over emphasis on “information management” could “ignore” “discourse” (Heath 2000, p34). Daymon and Demetrious argued that the study of PR had been focused on the “tools and apparatus” of transmitting “text” (Daymon & Demetrious 2013, p4). A recent PR blog by Deputy CEO of the UK’s Chartered Institute of Public Relations implied a heightened functionality brought about by “the march of technology (enabling) the automation of content” (Morgan 2015).

I would argue that ‘one way’ or ‘linear’ communication, which emphasises a dissemination heavy approach, could create a power see-saw effect whereby the sender controls the dissemination but loses some or all control in the receipt of the message. This risks losing PR value – such as trust, believability, or longevity. The trust factor in communication was reflected in a February 2014 interview with PR Week American PR guru Harold Burson, who said: “I think PR has two components; behaviour and communications. You can have the best communications...but if you don’t live up to the promise you will not reach (your) objectives…” (PR Week 2014, p45). Similarly, ‘Edelman’s 2015 Trust Barometer’ identified 4 engagement factors that build organisational trust: “listens to customer needs and feedback; treats employees well; places customers ahead of profits; communicates frequently and honestly” (Edelman 2015).

Grunig et al’s ‘Excellence theory’ sees PR as contributing to delivery of organisational objectives (Davis 2007, p85). Yet objectives can be variable depending on purpose and vision. If the objective is publicity – achieved by using dissemination techniques with frequency, intensity, and with mass reach, then it may be achieved using one-way or linear methods, such as with political propaganda or celebrity promotion. This could be apparent in political communication or where a celebrity achieves ‘cult status’. Although I would argue this embodies an inherent risk of lack of outcome control – which only sufficient political, social or economic power could mitigate. However, if
organisational objectives are strategic, long-term and exist in a competitive or conditional environment, they may be best achieved through a relational approach.

Shannon and Weaver (1949) developed ‘the communication loop’ including “feedback” between ‘receiver’ and ‘sender’ (Narula 2006, p26). This introduced a reactive role for the communication recipient, although implied a sequential level of engagement, rather than the “simultaneous” kind Steinberg considered (2007, p57). Shannon and Weaver recognised the potential for interference, “noise”, in transmission influencing the effect (Davis 2007, p79-80) and Kotler (1991) considered the ‘distortion’ and ‘selectivity’ that could be applied by the receiver (Davis 2007, p81). This similarly suggests the sender may control original message definition and initial dissemination, but it is weakened if intermediary factors affecting receipt go unmanaged. In 2010 Larissa Grunig argued that “feedback” wasn’t necessarily two-way communication (Grunig & Grunig 2010, p3). This could reflect that, because communication happens within time and space, the extent of immediacy and duality of sender and receiver engagement heightens its two-way potential and organisational effectiveness.

A tripartite typology of Shannon & Weaver’s ‘noise’ was identified by Steinberg in 2007 as “internal noise” – within the receiver, “external noise” – contextual, and “semantic noise” – misunderstanding (Steinberg 2007, p49). Westley & MacLean (1957) saw messages as flowing back and forth between sender and receiver (A & B) but affected – positively or negatively - by intermediary ‘gatekeepers’, like the press (Narula 2006, p31). A recent example of such negative ‘noise’ was a 2014 NHS England information campaign for a patient data usage project. The media presented alarm at the potential for research and drug companies access to patient data for “harvesting” for research and development (Ramesh 2014). Although NHS England’s Chief Data Officer responded promptly, implying inaccurate media reporting, and calling for a “debate based on facts” (NHS England 2014), the project was subsequently put on hold due to, as The Daily Telegraph reported, the initiative not
being “properly communicated” (Donnelly, 2014). Based on outcome, communication had failed despite dissemination of information, due to media and public distrust.

More recent understanding of communication in PR has been shaped by Grunig & Grunig’s Four Models – ‘press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical’ (1984) and their subsequent and related ‘Excellence Project’ (1992) where they identified 14 factors enabling PR to play a role in delivering organisational objectives (Davis 2007, p85). This latter work positioned ‘symmetrical’ communication between sender and receiver – or organisation and its publics - as the pinnacle of excellence. The extent to which this is achievable and desirable has shaped PR debate. The symmetrical approach suggests an ‘interdependence’, ‘openness’ (Davis 2007, p31) and ‘dialogue’ (Heath 2000, p32) between sender and receiver to achieve ‘win-win’ outcomes for both. It sees publics as having an organisational stake. In a 2010 Annual Lecture, Larissa Grunig identified “controlled mutuality” as one feature of effective stakeholder relations (Grunig & Grunig 2010, p2). Freeman categorised three types of stake “equity”, “economic”, and “influencer” (Cornelissen 2004, part 3.3).

This suggests communication in PR is not solely about message but relationship, to achieve objectives. It is consistent with contemporary definitions of PR as “…the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour” in the UK (CIPR 2015); and “Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” in the USA (PRSA 2015).

This is apparent in the way some notable UK organisation have moved beyond a simple economic transactional, and information dissemination approach, with their customers to develop an ongoing relationship. This is something digital communication could be argued to have facilitated. Supermarket chain Lidl UK invites customers to “Become a Lidler!” and receive a twice weekly newsletter and engage in dialogue via social media (Lidl 2015). British Airways promotes its
Executive Club advocating it as “Another way to belong” (BA 2015), and English Heritage invites people to “Get closer with membership” (English Heritage 2015). Mackey also considered power shifts caused by social media, including potential for “micro-activists”, and the challenge presented to “simple communication models such as the ‘sender-receiver’ model” (2003, p7).

The ongoing relational character of communication, in pursuit of achieving strategic corporate objectives, calls for consideration of effect and impact. Berlo in 1960 recognised the need to “assess” the effect of a message (Narula 2006, p31). Dozier (1985), Lindenmann (1990), MacNamara (1992), and Watson (1993 & 94) each considered lack of knowledge, money and time as barriers to evaluation (Watson 2000, p264). Cutlip, Center & Broom (1994) saw it as “systematic measures of...effectiveness” (Watson 2000, p260). This moves communication on from quantitative output measures to impact evaluation such as in Macnamara’s macro model of evaluation ‘quality of message’ (Watson 2000, p265) or Cutlip’s ‘outcome’ measurement (Watson 2000, p264).

In conclusion, communicator, message, recipient, and effect are factors reflected in the models discussed. The extent and sequence with which these factors interact determine whether there is a functional one-way approach that characterises dissemination, or a more two-way relational approach. Contemporary perspectives on PR emphasise mutual understanding for behaviour change to demonstrably achieve organisational objectives. For organisations that share that aim, a more negotiated, dialogical and relational approach to PR positions dissemination as one element in ongoing communication. In that light dissemination may be a part of communication but they are not equivalent, and to consider them so would be to perpetuate an equivalence myth.
References


Morgan, P., 2013. ‘Let the Robot Write the Press Release’.


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