

Interviu cu James Grunig*

profesor de relații publice, University of Maryland

Dear Professor Grunig,

You are one of the internationally best-known researchers in the field of communication management. You will join for the first time the Romanian PR community on the occasion of the 6th edition of the Romanian Public Relations Week (30th September – 3rd October 2008). Meetings with PR professionals, discussions with professors and students are part of the visit's schedule.

1. Public relations is now a profession with a scholarly body of knowledge. Furthermore, public relations is becoming a management function rather than only a technical communication function. What are - in your opinion - the key trends, issues and challenges for Public Relations in the future?

I agree that public relations now has a scholarly body of knowledge and that it is becoming a management function rather than a technical communication function only. I believe the strongest trend in public relations is the evolution toward a strategic managerial role. Ironically, the key issues and challenges facing public relations relate to the forces that limit the management role of public relations and the development of the body of knowledge in the discipline. The first problem facing public relations is confusion over what it means for public relations to be strategic. The idea that public relations should be strategic rather than tactical has become a buzzword today in professional circles. However, my Swiss colleague, Francesco Lurati of the University of Lugano, has written that most practitioners of public relations typically define strategic public relations as communication that *supports the implementation of organizational objectives* rather than as *true participation in the making of organizational decisions*. In Lurati's words: "From this perspective corporate communication is considered strategic when it pursues objectives which are merely aligned with the corporate ones. The term 'strategy' does not change the tactical nature of the task communication fills... the communication function makes no contribution to the defining of corporate strategy."

I believe this misunderstanding of what it means for public relations to be strategic is most common among practitioners who are guided by what I call an interpretive theory of public relations. I believe there have been, and still are, two major competing theories of public relations both in practice and in the academic world. I call these approaches

the symbolic, interpretive, paradigm and the strategic management, or behavioral, paradigm.

Scholars and practitioners following the symbolic paradigm generally assume that public relations strives to influence how publics *interpret* the organization. These cognitive interpretations are embodied in such concepts as image, reputation, brand, impressions, and identity. Practitioners who follow the interpretive paradigm emphasize publicity, media relations, and media effects. Communication tactics, this theory maintains, create an impression in the minds of publics that allow the organization to buffer itself from its environment – to use the words of the Dutch communication theorist Cees van Riel. Buffering attempts to put up a smokescreen of favorable messages to disguise the true behavior of the organization, which in turn allows the organization to behave in the way it wants.

In contrast, the behavioral, strategic management, paradigm focuses on the participation of public relations executives in strategic decision-making to help manage the behavior of organizations. In the words of van Riel, public relations is a bridging, rather than a buffering, function. It is designed to build relationships with stakeholders, rather than a set of messaging activities designed to buffer the organization from them. In the strategic management approach to public relations, which I advocate, public relations executives are involved in management decision-making before decisions are made, not afterwards. Their role is to identify the consequences of potential decisions on stakeholders, consequences that create publics. They then communicate with publics, also before decisions are made, so that publics have a voice in decision-making and their interests are taken into account. Public relations people build relationships with these publics to improve the quality of managerial decisions and to reduce the risks and costs of these decisions.

The belief that the interpretive paradigm is strategic rather than tactical also shows up in the discussion of measurement in public relations. For example, research firms have tried to establish that favorable media placements are correlated with the achievement of business goals such as sales, profits, or preferences of consumers. Others have tried to demonstrate that money spent on product publicity has a greater return on investment (ROI) than money spent on advertising. In contrast, the measurements required for the strategic management approach are deceptively simple. We should measure the nature and

quality of relationships between organizations and publics to establish and monitor the value of public relations. And we should evaluate public relations strategies and tactics to determine which are most effective in cultivating these relationships.

This difference in thinking about the strategic role of public relations also can be found in the debate about the relationship between public relations and marketing. Marketing communication has always been a specialized part of public relations, and marketing public relations practitioners understandably want a larger share of the marketing budget. However, both my research in the Excellence study and research conducted by the Strategic Public Relations Center at the University of Southern California show that public relations executives are less likely to play a strategic role and to be understood and appreciated by other executives when public relations is limited to a supporting role for marketing. Generally, when public relations is limited to supporting marketing, it does so by emphasizing a messaging, buffering role. The research also shows, however, that public relations should not avoid working with marketing. Rather, public relations seems to play the strongest strategic role when the marketing component of public relations is integrated into a larger strategic public relations role (integrated communication) rather than public relations being submerged into marketing (integrated marketing communication).

Therefore, I think there are three key challenges facing the public relations profession: 1) changing the way practitioners, their management colleagues, and their clients think about public relations from an interpretive, buffering, role to a strategic managerial role; 2) conducting research to identify the theories and tools needed to carry out a strategic management role; and 3) educating both future public relations practitioners and other managers about the strategic management role of public relations and the tools needed to conduct it in that way.

2. What should societies demand and expect from public relations professionals in terms of moral behaviour? Could you highlight the socio-political role of the PR profession?

At this time, most societies probably do not expect much from public relations professionals. Most people seem to think of public relations as a symbolic, interpretive, function whose purpose is to make it difficult for them to truly understand what corporations, governments, and other organizations are doing that affect them. People generally assume that public relations is unethical and immoral by nature. In contrast, I believe that societies should expect the public relations profession to provide publics with a voice in decisions made by organizations that affect them. I also believe that societies should expect public relations professionals to be ethical counsellors to decision makers about the consequences of their decisions on others and on the moral obligation to communicate with those affected by decisions.

Public relations is all about developing relationships, and society is a network of relationships. As individuals, we

have less conflict in our lives if we develop good relationships with our spouses, children, neighbors, coworkers, bosses, teachers, friends, and even our enemies. The same is true with organizations that interact with each other and with publics in society. Generally, both individuals and organizations develop better relationships (characterized by trust, shared control, commitment, and satisfaction) if they use certain strategies when they communicate and interact with each other. They should communicate openly, authentically, and transparently – what I call symmetrical communication. They also should behave responsibly and in ways that serve the interests of others as well as themselves. Thus, the strategic management role of public relations is a social-political role. Public relations cultivates relationships with the publics and organizations in *society* that interact in the *political* system to make decisions collectively that enhance the interests of as many elements of a democratic society as possible.

3. If dialogue – or debate – is the appropriate rule of the game in a democracy – then transparency is the elixir of the information society. Do public relations professionals have enough courage to enhance transparency of democratic societies?

Courage comes from knowledge, strength of convictions, and acceptance of our role by others. Today, most public relations professionals probably lack one or more of these necessary conditions to develop the courage to be what my South African colleague, Derina Holtzhausen, who now teaches at the University of South Florida in the United States, calls an in-house activist. As an in-house activist, a public relations professional would stand up for transparency and authenticity in communication. He or she would challenge socially irresponsible decisions and unethical behavior. When he or she believes management is wrong, he or she would argue for the welfare of publics. Although many have the courage to play this role, they might become martyrs to the public relations cause rather than champions of the profession unless they develop knowledge, the strength of their convictions, and acceptance by others.

To gain courage, public relations professionals must develop greater knowledge of social responsibility, ethics, strategic management, and symmetrical communication. They must truly believe in these values of the public relations profession – i.e., develop the courage of their convictions – by banding together in public relations societies. Importantly, they must also convince others – both the managers or organizations and the population at large – that this is their role.

4. Many journalists, critical scholars and people are questioning the value and values of public relations. Do you believe that this criticism is based on a lack of understanding or it reflects the actual behaviour of public relations practitioners? What do you recommend the PR community should do to better explain the value of public relations?

I believe that most journalists question the value and values of public relations because they assume that all

practitioners are motivated by what I called the symbolic, interpretive, paradigm of public relations. As I explained in a previous answer, I think that many public relations practitioners believe in and follow this interpretive approach. When practitioners do follow this approach, I think that journalists and critical scholars are correct when they question the values and behaviors of public relations people.

At the same time, these same journalists and critical scholars refuse to recognize that there is another kind of practitioner—those that follow the behavioral, strategic management paradigm. Their criticism is skewed toward the least ethical and effective practitioners and obscures the socially valuable role played by the best practitioners. Thus, I believe their criticism both reflects the actual behavior of many practitioners at the same time that it is based on a lack of understanding of excellent public relations.

This behavior of practitioners and the understanding of the profession can only be changed slowly. I have argued that the interpretive approach to public relations has become institutionalized in the minds of the majority of public relations practitioners and almost everyone else as what public relations *is*. I believe the public relations community must work to reinstitutionalize itself as a strategic management function. Institutionalization takes a long time and, like a ship entering a harbor, takes a long time to change course—i.e., to reinstitutionalize. We can only change our course incrementally. I think we can do this by changing the behavior of many public relations practitioners, by changing the way public relations is described in textbooks and university curricula, and by gradually showing society that we are a responsible and valuable profession by providing an increasing number of examples of responsible practice.

5. If we see public relations as a management function that uses communication to cultivate relationships with publics that have a stake in the behavior of the organization, how do you see the role of the CSR function within an organization? Can modern public relations really help the management in making socially responsible decisions?

Edward Bernays once said that “public relations is the practice of social responsibility.” I agree. I believe that excellent public relations is the management function whose primary goal is to challenge the organization to be more socially responsible. It does so by identifying negative consequences of management decisions and behaviors on publics. “Negative consequences” typically equate to irresponsible decisions and behaviors. Public relations professionals can identify negative consequences only by communicating with and listening to publics before decisions are made to identify what these consequences are and by explaining the nature of the consequences on publics to management. They can develop scenarios of how publics might be affected by the consequences and of how publics might organize to challenge the consequences through litigation, legislation, regulation, negative publicity, and the

like – actions that have negative consequences on the organization. These scenarios can be used to help management make decisions by knowing the full consequences of those decisions, both on publics and the organization. Public relations professionals then can organize symmetrical communication programs to help management and publics negotiate the behaviors of each in a way that minimizes the consequences of the behavior of each on the other.

I truly believe that modern public relations can be the in-house activist for publics who helps management make socially responsible decisions. However, to do so, practitioners must develop the knowledge, strength of convictions, and acceptance by others that I described in my answer to the previous question.

I would like to point out, however, that public relations practitioners who follow the symbolic, interpretive, approach to public relations often interpret CSR programs in a much different way. Rather than seeing CSR as something that relates to the everyday decisions and behaviors of management, they see CSR as philanthropy or image-making activities that have little to do with the strategic behavior of the organization. With this approach, CSR activities are used only to develop positive messages in the hope of buffering the organization from public criticism of irresponsible or unethical behaviors. Such image-making activities should not be equated with CSR. There is nothing wrong with philanthropy, but charitable giving should be done because it has value for strategic stakeholders such as employees, communities, consumers, or government and not simply because it creates positive publicity.

6. Your contribution during the Romanian Public Relations Week 2008 (30th September – 1st October) will focus on Responsible Communication. Can you provide our readers with some key topics you will speak about?

I will speak on the same topics that I have addressed in this interview. I will discuss my research on public relations as a strategic management function; on research that my colleagues and I have done to provide tools that strategic public relations practitioners can use in their work, such as scenario building, identifying publics, and the measurement of relationships; and what public relations people should know and do to be counsellors of ethics and social responsibility in organizations.

Interview realized by Dana OANCEA,
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* **James E. Grunig** (Ph.D. University of Wisconsin, 1968), Professor Emeritus, is the coauthor of *Managing Public Relations, Public Relations Techniques, Manager's Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management, and Excellent Public Relations and Effective Organizations: A Study of Communication Management in Three Countries*. He was editor of *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*. He has published 250 articles, books,

chapters, papers, and reports. Grunig was named the first winner of the Pathfinder Award for excellence in academic research on public relations by the Institute for Public Relations Research and Education in 1984. In 1989, he received the Outstanding Educator Award of the Public Relations Society of America. In 1992, the PRSA Foundation awarded him the Jackson, Jackson & Wagner award for outstanding behavioral science research. He won the most prestigious lifetime award of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) in 2000, the Paul J. Deutschmann Award for Excellence in Research. In 2002, he was awarded the James W. Schwartz Award for Distinguished Service to Journalism and Communication by an alumnus of the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication, Iowa State University. In 2005, he received the highest award of the Institute for Public Relations, the

Alexander Hamilton Medal for Lifetime Contributions to Professional Public Relations, and the Dr. Hamid Notghi Prize for Career Achievement in Public Relations from the Kargozar Public Relations Institute, Tehran, Iran. In 2006, he delivered the annual distinguished lecture of the Institute for Public Relations and was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Universidad San Martin de Porres of Lima, Peru. He directed the \$400,000 research project for the IABC Research Foundation on excellence in public relations and communication management. Selected Publications: Grunig, J. E. (2006). Furnishing the edifice: Ongoing research on public relations as a strategic management function. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 18, 151-176. Yang, S. U., & Grunig, J.E. (2005). Decomposing organizational reputation: The effects of organization-public relationship outcome.

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