



**UNIVERSITY OF
CANBERRA**

Australia's Capital University

The Face of Public Relations in Australia

An inquiry into academic and practitioner perceptions of practice, power, and professionalism in contemporary Australian public relations.

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Katrana Helen Byrne

University of Canberra
Australia

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Imaginations which people have of one another are the
solid facts of society.

- C.H. Cooley

Abstract

This dissertation presents research into the public relations field in Australia, including its background, design, results and recommendations. Research investigated areas of convergence and divergence of ideas about public relations practice between Australian practitioners and academics. The project was inspired by a significant gap in the Australia-specific public relations literature, as there is limited or no in-depth empirical investigation into notions of meaning, dimensions of practice, professionalism, organisational power, and education, in the public relations field in Australia.

While research has been conducted into how those outside the profession view public relations, few have asked those within the industry (practitioners and academics) about their understanding of public relations in Australia, nor compared these findings to locate and analyse spaces of convergence and divergence of meaning.

Inquiry was facilitated through the administration of two online questionnaires; one targeted to those identifying as public relations practitioners, and the other for those who identified as public relations academics. Each questionnaire comprised six sections, and sought a mixture of in-depth qualitative and quantitative data on the following areas:

- Meaning, scope and agreement of the term 'public relations'
- The dimensions of public relations
- Perceptions of public relations practice
- Perceptions of public relations scholarship
- Perceptions of public relations education
- Respondent demographics

As non-probability sampling was applied to this study, it is not possible to report a response rate. That said, a total of 40 academic and 107 practitioner responses were received and comprise the data set. Administration of the questionnaires generated a significant amount of both qualitative and quantitative data.

The results were diverse and intriguing, leading to a number of specific recommendations and suggestions for further research. For example, the study found that:

- There exists a gap between respondent definitions of the term 'public relations' and respondent reports of public relations practice;
- Both public relations academics and practitioners underestimate the professional practice of their practitioner colleagues;
- While most practitioners see academics as adding value to the public relations field, a considerable proportion do not, yet findings indicate that academics may not be as out of touch as practitioners imagine;
- Both public relations academics and practitioners conceive notions of professionalism in the same manner; and

- Both groups identify writing and interpersonal skills as the most valuable skills for a public relations practitioner to possess, and both groups also prioritise knowledge of public relations specific theory and principles. Practitioners also prioritise the need for greater attention to general business practices in public relations education, while academics determine a need for greater emphasis of ethical standards and research competence.

This research project closes with a number of direct recommendations and areas for further inquiry. Among these, it is suggested, for example, that academics become mindful of underestimating professional practice as doing so may perpetuate negative images of the field. Rather, academics should be encouraged to seek out opportunities for collaboration with practitioners. Dialogue between academics and practitioners can enhance accurate understanding of, not only the dimensions of practice, but also the value of academia, in the field. Via these, and the other key lessons and recommendations, the findings and results of this research project have dramatically furthered efforts to map the landscape of public relations in Australia.

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