
**PARADIGMS, PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICE OF PUBLIC
RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR
‘DISCIPLINED IMAGINATION’
IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOLARSHIP**

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ABSTRACT

Increasing technological complexity and globalisation have resulted in fundamental societal and business changes that require scholars and practitioners to challenge their own assumptions, and come to grips with the implications of paradigm shifts in various fields. The tensions that arise as a result of these changes dictate a need for the communication professional to transcend the boundaries of their own values and thought frameworks in order to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal. This article explores the nature of these paradigm shifts, and considers what implications tensions in the field hold for public relations and communication scholarship in general, but also specifically for the South African field of scholarship and practice. South African scholars are urged to rediscover the “disciplined imagination” proposed by Weick (1989) if they are to transcend disciplinary boundaries and move towards a more meaningful contribution in the cooperative search for solutions to complex problems.

Keywords: boundary spanning, paradigm shifts, multi-paradigms, paradigmatic debates, functionalism, research, practice, SA Public Relations and Communication scholarship

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of current global political, economic and social turmoil, a vast array of new management values and methods are emerging. Increasing technological complexity, changing lifestyles and expectations, coupled with the growth of knowledge workers, have reshaped management processes and dictated organisations to evolve beyond the traditional bureaucratic model. Accordingly, organisations are coming under increasing pressure not only to learn, change and adapt, but also to take actions that are ethically acceptable and sustainable, and which balance the interests of a range of different stakeholders (Rowley & Gibbs 2008: 357).

Edwards (2005: 269-288) suggests that this shift entails that integral approaches to change can consider the exchange relations between social agents in terms of their consciousness, behaviour, cultural and social dimensions; their respective developmental stages, lines and dynamics; the learning processes and environments involved in the interaction; the multiple personal and group perspectives that can be relevant to the interaction; and the nature of the artefacts/communications mediating the interaction.

However, these changes do not only affect the practice of public relations and communication. These fundamental changes require that scholars and practitioners challenge their own assumptions, and come to grips with the implications of paradigm shifts in various fields. Gower (2006: 185) has however suggested that public relations scholars have not kept up to date with changes in other disciplines, such as management sciences. In the case of public relations, the underlying paradigm that has dominated much of public relations theory for over 20 years is the Excellence Model developed by James Grunig and various collaborators (Phillips & Young 2009). As a result of this dominance, communication professionals have been slow to come to grips with these shifting paradigms, partly because there is no clear line that demarcates the shift between modern and postmodern communication practice, and partly because practitioners are held captive by their own modernist assumptions. Wang (2011: 1462) notes that “under the name of science we readily accept the universality of methods, theories and paradigms” unaware of the problems these may bring in applying them across time and geographical boundaries.

While paradigms are useful frameworks for conducting enquiries and for analyses, they also tend to obscure our ability to see beyond the limitations of their boundaries. Thompson (1993) observes that the nature and extent of adherence to these assumptions is very often justified on the basis of “social consensus”.

Grunig (2009: 16) suggests that while the behavioural management paradigm should not be abandoned by scholars and practitioners as a modernist paradigm in favour of the interpretive paradigm, digital communication does have “the

potential to truly revolutionise public relations – but only if a paradigm shift in the thinking of many practitioners and scholars takes place”. According to De Klerk and Verwey (2013: 4), paradigm shifts contrast and reveal both the differences and the interplay that exists between competing paradigms and, as such, frames the nature of the paradigmatic issues that require resolution. Paradigm shifts are thus always subject to paradigmatic debate and scrutiny of the moral reasoning on which it is based. Sardar (2009: 443) observes:

The discourse we need must clarify what ethical principles we are accountable to, which must be upheld in the choices we make, with all the humility and modesty we apply to our understanding of our problems, searching for solutions with all the uncertainties, and hence risks and imperfections, we accept as routine elements in our affairs.

Against this background this article argues for the need to span paradigmatic, disciplinary professional boundaries if public relations and communication is to assume the influential role that has been afforded to it in post-bureaucratic communication contexts. The article also reflects on the implications this holds for public relations and communication scholarship in the South African context.

CROSSING PARADIGM BOUNDARIES

McSweeney (2006: 22) suggests that an increasing number of studies point to the demise of the bureaucratic organisation and the emergence of the post-bureaucratic organisation. This “discourse of ending” is often expressed as a “paradigm shift” or profound movement beyond bureaucracy. Clegg (1990: 176) argues that modernism is premised on increasing functional differentiation of social phenomena. Organisations are the frameworks which link these differentiations, and the management of modernity involves practices for integrating the core processes of differentiation. Holtzhausen (2002: 253) sees modernism reflected in many areas of public relations practice, theory and research. Stokes (2005: 556) argues that modernist approaches to public relations are mostly tactical and short term, and characterised by a tendency to examine issues through instrumental approaches that evaluate how effectively organisational goals and pursuits can be realised. This approach is also reflected in Grunig’s (1992) view of strategic public relations management as a process of winnowing constituencies and negotiating to increase stability and reduce uncertainty. Wang (2011: 1462) accordingly suggests that a paradigm closely reflects the needs, values and aspirations of the historic, cultural and social context that has nurtured it. Rationalist models of strategic management (Grunig 2009; Grunig & Pepper 1992; Vercic & Grunig 2000) accordingly advance a behavioural managerial paradigm in which the management of communication is a key function. Holtzhausen (2002) suggests that this focus

on management and strategy might well have brought about a significant crisis in the brief academic existence of public relations as scholars and practitioners increasingly challenge the legitimacy of managers setting the goals for the organisation and the “rationality” of management decisions.

Increasing numbers of academic texts have also interrogated the very bases of the modernist (functional) paradigms on which public relations theory and practice had historically built its theoretical foundations (Holtzhausen 2002). This strongly suggests a further need to expand theoretical approaches, and to “free communication management from the iron cage of the Excellence study” (Sandhu 2009: 87). However, in response to these scholarly challenges, Grunig (2009: 15-16) notes:

Using a normative prescriptive theory, my colleagues, students, and I have long provided evidence that public relations has greater value both for organisations and society when it is strategic, managerial, symmetrical, integrated but not sublimated, diverse, and ethical – as captured by our generic global principles.

Dozier and Lauzen (2000) advocate the re-conceptualisation of public relations as intellectual domain and caution about the dangers of coupling the intellectual domain too tightly to the institution that serves as focus of the domain. They argue that the intellectual traditions of public relations scholarship have traditionally been too closely coupled to what Mumby (1997) refers to as “framing of the modern positivist project” (Dozier & Lauzen 2000). Holtzhausen (2000: 95) contends that public relations and communication management should be understood as a product of both democracy and capitalism, and as such it is not exempted from the scrutiny of postmodernism.

BRIDGING PERSPECTIVES

Postmodernism represents a broad theoretical approach, and postmodern philosophers and theorists emphasise that there is no central postmodern theory (Christensen, Torp & Firat 1995). In response to the modernist emphasis on single, dominant theoretical perspectives and philosophies (meta-narratives) postmodernists embrace multiplicity and diversity, and question even their own theoretical perspectives (Chia 1995). While traditional theory construction is founded on the belief in the factual nature of a knowable universe because it is viewed as an accomplished phenomenon, it seems as if postmodern strategic communication must like postmodern organisational theory reject the very notion of (normative) theory at the institutional level because of its emergent condition (Verwey 2010).

Nyström (2000: 109) argues that instead of emphasizing scientific rigour, formal logic and rationality as a basis for understanding and managing society – as in the modern bureaucratic organisation – postmodernism may be seen as characterised by pluralism, fragmentation, ambiguity and indeterminacy, defying attempts to generalise and extrapolate from past experience. Nyström (*ibid.*) proposes a balanced approach to both modernism and postmodernism, so that theory generation and implementation can assist in understanding and evaluating individual, organisational and societal action. Nyström (2000: 114) asserts that such a balanced, creative approach should assist in bridging the gap between academics and practitioners in describing and understanding their relevant realities. This view is also evident in Grunig's (2009: 9) defence of the strategic behavioural management paradigm when he argues:

The strategic management paradigm contains elements of both modernism and postmodernism. Thus, I would call it a semi-postmodern approach to the role of public relations in strategic management.

The erosion of an authoritative point of reference has resulted in approaches that at once challenge the notion of a single reality, and suggest alternative ways of viewing and making sense of reality (Christensen *et al.* 1995). Edwards (2005: 269) suggests:

The choice of focal levels of analysis is profound and central to the development of any model; it affects the conceptual framework, research methods, locus of interest and, consequently, the full measure of a theoretical and empirical approach to a phenomenon.

Van de Ven and Poole (1995: 516) argue that it is when various conceptual approaches are seen in relation to each other that opportunities for new theory development emerge. While there is no doubt that there is an array of approaches that are currently available to theorists, researchers and consultants involved in the management of communication, many of these are single-paradigm approaches that are based on similar sets of assumptions which do not provide for alternative ways of viewing and making sense of complex realities. What is required is a multi-paradigm approach to theory-building that has the potential to integrate different explanatory perspectives that are represented in the public relations and communication literature into a framework that provides a higher level of explanation.

However, De Klerk and Verwey (2013) suggest that a lack of a coherent body of knowledge exists in multi-paradigmatic contexts. This is because unlike single-paradigm approaches, which are based on similar sets of assumptions and which develop through evolutionary extension, multi-paradigm approaches require

paradigm crossing and interplay to emerge. Goia and Pitre (1990: 591) argue that multi-paradigm approaches offer new insights because they “start from different ontological and epistemological assumptions” and therefore can tap different facets and provide uniquely informative views of the complex events that are studied.

Goia and Pitre (1990: 591) also suggest that although a greater abundance of theories can contribute to a greater understanding of complex realities, the incommensurability of paradigms can also lead to “fragmentation and provincialism in the field” with scholars refusing to consider theories that have their origins in other paradigms. Evidence of such in the field of public relations can be found in the view of Grunig (2009: 15) who notes:

To reach this state as a profession, however, public relations practitioners and scholars must minimise the extent to which the symbolic, interpretive paradigm of public relations affects their thinking and institutionalise public relations as a strategic management, behavioural paradigm.

Bowers (2014: 4) points to the constraints such a position may have on:

- ♦ The grasp the practitioner may have of significant aspects of the problem situation and context, especially of those aspects which would present themselves only from within alternative paradigmatic viewpoints;
- ♦ The limited variety of methods to use for intervention, especially of those methodologies that are aligned with the alternative paradigms; and
- ♦ Effectiveness suffers a lack of informed guidance from proper theory and a coherent multi- methodological approach to naturally multi-paradigmatic problem situations.

However, because the boundaries between paradigms tend to be ill-defined and blurred, Goia and Pitre (1990: 592) suggest that they could be more usefully conceived as “transition zones” that could be bridged through the use of higher-order concepts. This requires that an individual paradigm must be viewed from a vantage point beyond the particular paradigm. Schultz and Hatch (1996: 530) propose that paradigm interplay represents a paradigm crossing strategy that simultaneously recognises both contrasts and connections between paradigms. As such it produces new forms of understanding that could be equated with paradox. Paradox denotes “contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously” (Lewis 2000: 760). In this regard Bowers (2014: 4) notes that the paradox of paradigm incommensurability (and also multi-methodology) must be acknowledged and that “we must learn to accept a degree of incommensurability”.

Bowers (2012: 329) further argues that by engaging in the moment of becoming (of an issue or problem) with multiple paradigms the practitioner “allows each paradigm to complement or compete with the others in terms of ontological, as well as epistemological and methodological relativism – a relativism dependent upon facets of the specific problem situation of concern”. Such a multiple perspective view should however not be regarded as a demand for integrated theories or resolution of disagreements or paradoxes; it should rather be viewed as an attempt to connect the many different theoretical perspectives through their transition zones (Edwards 2005: 596). It must be noted however that any multi-paradigm approach is still rooted in a basic set of ground assumptions from which the theorist can view their second-order vantage point preferences. Multiple paradigm perspectives offer the possibility of understanding why agreement is simply not possible, or why agreement is possible despite differences in ontology, epistemology and methodology (which may only evolve through consideration at a meta-level). Goia and Pitre (1990: 256) suggest:

Given that a uniquely correct perspective does not exist, and given the multiplicity of organisational realities, a pluralistic multiple-perspectives view becomes a necessity for achieving any sort of comprehensive view.

Against this background Mahoney (2011: 144-145, citing Zerfass 2009) also suggests that there thus are two possible future scenarios for communication – one a recidivist normative state (as propagated by Grunig) in which traditional approaches to public relations and communication and advertising will be revived, or the emergence of a multi-paradigmatic strategic approach that differs from integrated communication because it spans all organisational endeavours and activities, and offers the possibility of a coherent multi-methodological approach to naturally multi-paradigmatic problem situations.

SPANNING THE BOUNDARIES OF PRACTICE AND PRAXIS

Unfortunately, current public relations and communication practice still suffers from a lack of informed guidance from proper theory, and a coherent multi-methodological approach to naturally multi-paradigmatic problem situations. Research findings from a study conducted by Tindall and Holtzhausen (2011: 75) though suggest that strategic communication can be viewed as a “common denominator for all forms of communication practice across different contexts”. As such, Hallahan *et al.* (2007: 16) suggest that “strategic” communication should not be defined too narrowly, but should remain the rich, multidimensional, inclusive – even contradictory – descriptor of communication practice that it currently is. Hallahan *et al.* (*ibid.*) note in this regard:

Although it emphasises the role of communication as management practice, it does not necessarily imply power and control of management over

stakeholders. It also allows for the study of participatory communication practices that include stakeholder communication, change management, and complex analysis of stakeholder environments. 'Strategic' further includes the study of all communication practices, including those of public relations, advertising, and marketing as well as others.

The possibilities that a strategic communication paradigm may offer at a meta-level of analysis can only evolve if public relations professionals challenge their existing intellectual assumptions, and develop multi-paradigmatic approaches to strategic communication practice. De Klerk and Verwey (2013) contend that such a comprehensive view is offered by the emergent approach of strategic communication. Within this approach, communication as strategy is conceptualised as emergent because it arises from the interactions of others (Seidl 2007: 201). As such, strategic communication is defined by Hallahan *et al.* (2007: 3) as the "purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission". This purposefulness should also be understood as purposeful in terms of purpose of being.

Wilson (1996: 73) suggests that previous strategic management approaches to public relations are limiting in three ways:

- ♦ Rationalist and utilitarian approaches to the identification of key publics and their relationship to organisational goals are almost always translated into economic terms;
- ♦ Solutions are most often based on "short-term" problem-solving; and
- ♦ Decisions are frequently based on a self-interest approach and "less concerned with relationships than profit".

In contrast, the emergent approach to strategic communication is described by De Klerk and Verwey (2013: 10) as follows:

Strategic communication is about how an organisation functions to advance its mission by intentional, persuasive means of communication, not only via marketing and corporate and other institutionalised forms of public communication, but via all of the organisation's communication. What this in fact means, is that communication is no longer 'a' function or a role in the organisation, but through its enactment is reflexively shaping the organisation itself.

This corresponds with the view of Barry and Elmes (1997: 432-433) that all stakeholders become active participants in shaping strategy through emergence and by enacting "fictional futures from creative interpretations of the past".

King (2014: 35) defines the concept of emergent strategy as a communicatively constituted construct “derived from the interaction between reader/hearer response, situated context, and discursive patterns” and which draws on the “social constructionist view of organisations”. King (2014: 35) suggests that strategic communication may therefore be better regarded as emerging regardless of intent, and as an iterative approach which will help promote a culture of sensitivity to the dynamic interaction between the organisation and its differently situated stakeholders.

Yip, Ernst and Campbell (2011) contend that the ever-increasing complexity and interdependence of today’s world calls for a shift away from “managing and protecting” boundaries to boundary spanning – the capability to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal.

The Centre for Creative Leadership (Yip *et al.* 2011) has identified a number of critical boundaries that have to be worked across:

- ◆ Vertical boundaries – across hierarchy (7%);
- ◆ Horizontal – across functions and expertise (71%);
- ◆ Stakeholder – beyond the boundaries of the firm (17%);
- ◆ Demographic – across diverse groups: gender, ethnicity and nationality (17%); and
- ◆ Geographic – across regions and locality (26%).

One of the key findings from the study conducted by The Centre for Creative Leadership (Yip *et al.* 2011: 17) is that the increasing interconnection of today’s business landscape requires the bridging of boundaries to tap the innovative outcomes that lie at the intersection of groups working together, instead of in erecting barriers to manage the boundaries. Boundary spanners are therefore individuals who are involved in the creation and development of interorganisational partnerships and collaboration, also within the organisation (Marchington & Vincent 2004; Sullivan & Skelcher 2002).

A concern with bridging boundaries and transcending barriers is also evident in disciplinary debates: Wagner *et al.* (2010: 5) note that the “mid-century isolation of disciplinary silos declaimed by Boulding, appears to have given way quickly to boundary-crossing”.

Popa, Guillermin and Dedeurwaerdere (2015: 47) state:

If the dominant discourse on interdisciplinarity in the 1980s and 1990s has mainly focused on articulating the contributions of different disciplines into a coherent framework, the more recent analyses of

transdisciplinarity have shifted the focus towards the extended co-production of knowledge (by scientific and extra-scientific actors) and the importance of ‘unsettling’ established assumptions.

Evidently research foci ought to shift towards the social processes which constitute both society and the organisation. Such a shift requires new research approaches that will aid the understanding of how social rationalities produce perceptions of reality. This will require a poly-contextual rather than mono-contextual grasp of how these social realities are constituted. Popa *et al.* (2015: 47) suggest that “transdisciplinary research would benefit from adopting a pragmatist approach to reflexivity. Such an approach relates reflexivity to collective processes of problem-framing and problem-solving through joint experimentation and social learning that directly involve the scientific and extra-scientific expertise.” According to Midgley (2011) this entails:

... the process of making boundary judgments and the content of any analysis. Whether it’s an analysis concerning the world, or an analysis concerning knowledge generating systems that give rise to understandings of the world. This actually means that it is possible to accept any number of theories about either knowledge generating systems or the wider world.

Alvesson (2002) conceives a boundary as delimiting a particular value system or a point beyond which a particular meaning ceases to be a satisfactory way of making sense of an event. Boundaries must therefore be understood in terms of how they are defined by individuals, and may be characterised by tensions that exist between the different meanings and interpretations held by individuals (Alvesson 2002). According to Lewis and Smith (2014: 132), from this perspective “tensions appear inherent and ubiquitous in organisational life, arising from the interplay among complex, dynamic and ambiguous systems”. Boundary-spanners are shown to “exist as dynamic, structurally contextualised agents whose actions are shaped by a combination of organisational and contingency pressures and their own individual psychology” (Baker 2007). According to Lewis and Smith (2014: 132), a “contingency perspective approaches tensions as problems, solvable through rational analysis and formal logic” while a paradox lens accentuates the “need for a holistic understanding of tensions and cognitive and social influences on decision-making”. Popa *et al.* (2015: 54) contend that by emphasizing the role of “collaborative deliberation and practical knowledge generated through processes of social innovation and experimentation, pragmatism challenges the tendency to frame scientific reliability, social relevance and social legitimacy as distinct requirements on knowledge, to be traded off against one another”. What is required from public relations and communication professionals is the ability to transcend

their own paradigmatic assumptions, and develop multi-paradigmatic approaches to tensions that emerge in the context communication practice. These tensions dictate a need for the communication professional to transcend the boundaries of their own values and thought frameworks in order to create direction, alignment, and commitment across boundaries in service of a higher vision or goal.

Wang (2011) suggests that the development of new technology has historically been a dominant driver of paradigm emergence and shifts in communication science. The impact of connectivity on the content and focus of communication refers mainly to two aspects, namely extending the reach of communication and rapidly changing the patterns of communication access. The rapid changes that are brought about by developments in communication technologies further challenge communication professionals to transcend boundaries, and enact their roles as boundary spanners by developing multi-paradigmatic approaches to tensions that arise in their field of practice. At least four tensions challenge communication professionals to transcend their traditional conceptual and methodological preferences.

Transcending boundaries of power and influence

Van den Dam, Nelson and Lozinski (2008: 1) identify two long-term shifts in communication trends as a result of the emergence of social media; firstly, a shift in communication patterns – from point-to-point, two-way conversations, to many-to-many, collaborative communication – and secondly, a shift in the control of the communication environment to open platforms. This shift was facilitated by the development of Web 2.0 which went beyond the information-sharing capabilities of Web 1.0, and created possibilities for connecting, communicating, collaborating, social networking, individual and group publishing, blogging, crowd-sourcing and the transformation of traditional media. The evolution of the global economy has therefore seen a rise in the digital marketplace where stakeholders are no longer passive but they have become active participants in the dialogue surrounding brands. The development of Web 2.0 has not only led to virtually limitless connectivity and low-cost access, but has also resulted in a need for new communication models in the digital market space.

It has also introduced the possibility of disintermediation. Disintermediation greatly democratises access to the means of communication and to information and knowledge through direct access to one-to-many communication channels (Verwey 2001). The emergence of new communication models which emphasise many-to-many forms of communication has transformed recipients into active participants, content consumers into content generators, and recipients into producers (Mullins 2011; Obasanjo 2007). Van Dijk (2009: 46) suggests that the gravitation towards content production activities through co-creation and co-production afford users more power over content which can be exercised through

cooperation, compromise, or conflict in order to either add or detract from business value. The traditional approach of one voice has shifted to the emergent approach of many diverse voices, where power and influence is exerted bottom-up instead of top-down.

Transcending boundaries of function

As noted by Hallahan *et al.* (2007), communicators find it increasingly difficult to differentiate between traditional communication activities and their effects. PR practitioners are increasingly relying on paid advertising to communicate critical messages on issues. Marketers, in turn, are leading cause-related marketing and cooperative programmes that once were the exclusive domain of public relations. The nature and medium of brand communication are being rapidly altered by the move of users to environments that offer less expensive, but more expressive, capabilities to facilitate both one-to-one and group communications with more people than ever before (Verwey & Muir 2014). This has resulted in the need to have multiple context-related messages (omni-messaging), rather than single-message approaches across a number of communication platforms. In the globally interactive era, many influences shape stakeholder perceptions as stakeholders themselves participate in shaping and reshaping the meaning of brands and how this meaning is communicated (Needham 2008). As a result, Hallahan *et al.* (2007) and Zerfass and Huck (2007) suggest that any claim to exclusive responsibility for a particular domain of practice is increasingly being challenged by practitioners and theorists alike. While the purpose of integrated communication has always been to coordinate disparate activities, the boundaries between these activities are rapidly blurring due to convergence, and have given rise to increased interdependencies within communication network structures (Hallahan *et al.* 2007; Miller 2009). In this sense, collaboration has become a boundary spanning activity. Boundary spanning therefore entails more than just the integration of activities, as articulated in the notion of integrated communication, and instead focuses on how an organisation communicates across organisational endeavours (Hallahan *et al.* 2007: 7).

Transcending boundaries of modalities

Media convergence can be described as the process whereby the content of many different media forms become accessible through a variety of media types and devices. The resulting convergence of information and the emergence of big data has contributed to the fusion of recognised genres of public communication, and the “fluidity” of the organisational communication environment resulting from greater media availability and accessibility (Sriramesh & Vercic 2009: 80). Mueller (2010) notes that this convergence has forced the communication professional to engage with multiple media platforms and communication genres – thus further spanning the boundaries of practice and further blurring role boundaries. De Klerk

and Verwey (2013) suggest that in view of this convergence it has become highly questionable whether “above” and “below the line” distinctions are still relevant, or can be conceptually grounded in disciplines that still emphasise these differences.

Transcending boundaries of structure and form

In the 2012 Melbourne Mandate, communication management and the discipline is conceptualised as “something that defines what the organisation is rather than what the organisation does” (Rensburg 2012: 8). This view of the communicatively constituted organisation, rather than the communicating organisation, suggests that communication is no longer ‘a’ function or a role in the organisation, but is instead reflexively shaping the organisation itself through enactment (De Klerk & Verwey 2013). This notion of the organisation as communicatively constituted in terms “organising” and “enacting” are most frequently linked to the Influential theory of Weick (1979), which regards communication as the basis for human organising. Other theorists such as Luhmann (1986; 1995; 1996) also argued that communication(s), and nothing but communication(s), create social systems. Luhmann (1986: 174) identifies communication(s) as the basic elements of the social system, and says that:

Social systems use communication as their particular mode of autopoietic reproduction. Their elements are communications which are recursively produced and reproduced by a network of communications and which cannot exist outside such a network.

Micro-level analysis of the social interaction that continuously shapes relations inside and outside the organisation will deepen our understanding of communication processes that have important implications for the relational aspects of public relations. This requires understanding public relations and communication as an interaction, as opposed to the modernist notion of communication as top-down monologue, rather than bottom-up dialogue. More specifically, more qualitative and collaborative research approaches are required to provide a richer description and generate more meaningful insights in respect of organisation-stakeholder relationships.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOLARSHIP

In this article an argument has been made that the possibilities that a strategic communication paradigm may offer at a meta-level of analysis can only evolve if public relations scholars and professionals challenge their existing intellectual assumptions and develop multi-paradigmatic approaches to strategic communication. In their article on the emergence of the strategic communication paradigm De Klerk and Verwey (2013: 372) state:

Combining multi-paradigm characteristics draws attention to the many possibilities that exist for investigating how they might interrelate,

and enhance our understanding of the complex nature of the strategic communication paradigm. Strategic communication therefore requires a set of theoretical propositions of a higher level and with the potential to integrate various levels of understanding. While at the paradigm level some debates may not seem resolvable, at the meta-paradigm level they may, in fact, be complementary.

While paradigms continually evolve in all disciplines in response to the tensions that arise as a result of change, these often become dominant modes of enquiry as a result of reliance on traditional conceptual and methodological preferences (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski 2010). Unfortunately, while such dominance may provide strong guidance, particularly with regard to framing theory development and research, it can also limit creative conceptual thinking because scholars become trapped within a particular set of assumptions. This gives rise to the kind of “disciplinary hegemony” that has been so evident in the field of public relations and communication scholarship. As a result, new paradigms do not emerge because scholarly efforts are concentrated on paradigm extension, rather than on paradigm development. Wang (2011: 1459) observes:

Once accustomed to a paradigm, we are no longer aware of its existence. To grasp the essence of rapid changes, we are often encouraged to ‘think outside the box’ but the question is, are we aware of the existence of ‘the box’ and what it looks like?

Unfortunately, it can be argued that public relations and communication scholarship in the South African disciplinary context have become so trapped within the functional behavioural management paradigm of the Excellence approach, that it suffers from what Zelizer (2011: 10) describes as “sub-disciplinary near-sightedness”. This “near-sightedness” holds profound implications for scholarship and research in the field.

Firstly, there is a lack of critical scholarship in the field because theorising outside of the dominant paradigm is not encouraged or tolerated. The lack of critical engagement stems from a dependency on a particular framework of thinking, which also results in what Wang (2011: 1458) refers to as a “stability” that more closely resembles inertia. As a result, “continuity rather than change” (*ibid.*) has characterised South African scholarship in the field. One need only undertake a cursory analysis of South African research outputs in the field at both Master’s and doctoral level to confirm the extent to which this paradigm still dominates. This results in what Hill and Martin (2014: 18) refer to as “narrow and distilled” thinking.

This narrowness relates to the second implication for scholarship which relates to what Wang (2014: 373) identifies as Euro-American centrism in theory development and research. As Wang (*ibid.*) suggests, the notion of geo-cultural theory should also be considered precisely because Western concepts, theories and paradigms are not universal, but actually exist within paradigmatic boundaries that neglect both cultural and paradigm differences. Wang (2014: 374) explains this difference as follows: “Geo-cultural theories explain and predict only those phenomena that fall within a certain geographic or cultural boundary, whereas the culture-general approach does not specify such limitations.”

Wang (2014) acknowledges that the postmodern pre-occupation with the specific rather than the universal also limits the development of theories involving different paradigms and cultures, but argues that between “extreme universality and extreme particularity, scattered in various fields of study there have also developed concepts and theories that reflect features of not a mechanistic, but an organic worldview”.

Wang (2011a: 226) suggests that “while interpreting incommensurable concepts and theories may seem challenging, finding where in-commensurabilities may lie is equally, if not more, challenging”. It can be argued that South African public relations and communication scholars are so locked into American (and to a lesser extent Eurocentric) paradigms that we have not considered the possibilities that lie in the transition zones between paradigms. We therefore lack the sensitivity to recognise the potential of incommensurability among paradigms for developing our own geo-specific theories. In this manner our framing of paradigms further constrain our ability to transcend the boundaries of our assumptions, and to devel

This results in the third implication which relates to research. Ytterstad (2015: 3) argues that researchers within a particular paradigm tend to operate within a strategic version of the truth which results in a too rigid view of truth and a focus on salience in framing research – thus making it ill-equipped to account for emergent frames. Creaven (2007: 15) sees emergence as a function of internally-related objects or structures “because the relations which define or compromise them as such grants their constituents power and capacities they would not possess apart from their interaction or combination as parts of a whole”.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that all science is based on paradigmatic thinking involving distinct assumptions on the nature of reality (ontology), how we can come to know that reality (epistemology), and how we can systematically access what can be known about that reality (methodology). In this regard, Grunig (2003:90) suggests that paradigmatic challenge is not a necessary condition for innovative theory-building when he argues that “it is not always necessary to produce new structures nor is it necessary to limit the search to existing structures”. Goia and

Pitre (1990: 584) however argue for a multi-paradigm approach that offers ways of transcending or bridging blurred paradigm boundaries, and suggest:

... a metaparadigm perspective might allow disparate approaches to theory building to be considered together. Such a perspective can produce views of organisational phenomena that not only allow scholars to recognise inherent and irreconcilable theoretical differences, but also encourage them to adopt a more comprehensive view by accounting for those differences.

While public relations research and theory development has grown tremendously over the past 25 years, Botan and Taylor (2004) suggest that the need for more theory development has given way to a need for a greater diversity of competing theories. To a great extent, public relations and communication research in general has suffered from what Goia and Pitre (1990: 599) regard as “intellectual provincialism” where “paradigms are accepted to be fundamentally incommensurable and non-comparable, and therefore proceed with only one perspective without attempting to account for disparate views”. This has often been the case in South African public relations and communication scholarship, which has narrowly focused on the behavioural management paradigm with a resultant emphasis on only researching and developing theory from this paradigm, and a dismissal of the possibilities for integrating alternative paradigm-based theories. While South African scholars may have been productive in generating research in the field, they have not been innovative in “exploring the conceptual grounds for accommodating different approaches to theory building” (Goia & Pitre 1990: 599). Weick (1989) suggests that creative theory-building can only result from “multiple thought trials from various perspectives”; this is not possible in a field of scholarship that suffers from a lack of “disciplined imagination” to the extent that South African public relations and communication scholarship does.

Gower (2006) notes that much of public relations research has focused on what practitioners do. In applied theory-building research, a central mission is to conduct research that both advances an academic discipline and enlightens practice in a professional domain (Van de Ven 2007). The importance of questioning the values, background assumptions, and normative orientations shaping research has been increasingly acknowledged, particularly in the context of transdisciplinary research, which aims to integrate knowledge from various scientific and societal bodies of knowledge (Popa *et al.* 2015: 45). Edwards (2012: 10) suggests that the ways in which we delineate our field and objects of our research, implies a set of “rules” that establish appropriate empirical tools, statements of research problems, and evaluations of solutions to those problems for the group of scholars loyal to the paradigmatic assumptions that underpin it. Edwards (2012: 11) argues that

as a result definitions of the research object will tend to “privilege the dominant perspective, potentially presenting ontological difficulties for those challenging this paradigm, and perpetuating their marginalization”. The prevalence of a functional paradigm in public relations research has accordingly produced a static field with limited room for alternative perspectives (Cheney & Christiansen 2001). Such dominance creates fragmentation in the field and a lack of critical engagement occurs between or among scholarly groups, resulting in “careful mutual avoidance, a superb disregard on all sides” (Dogan 2004: 11024).

Edwards (2012: 23) suggests that it is time to consider how to define and situate public relations in a way that better reflects the plurality of views in the field, and create a more balanced context for their interaction. Edwards (2012: 14-23) states that the “emphasis on PR as a means of realizing organisational interests in functional approaches means that they prioritize formally constituted organisations as sites of PR practice”, whereas an understanding of public relations as flow “allows researchers to transcend the organisational context and take analyses beyond any kind of boundary, recognizing the fluidity and evolution of PR over time and space”. Because the functional paradigm is so well-established in South African public relations scholarship, there is a marked lack of disciplinary debate and contestation, and a preoccupation with establishing “Excellent” communication practices through symmetrical two-way communication and building positive relationships between organisations and their publics. There exists a need for South African scholars and researchers in the field to not only develop a greater reflexivity and openness, but to consciously clear the territorial boundaries that constrain paradigmatic variety and interaction, also because “these rules communicate and reinforce those assumptions across a range of different academic outlets, including textbooks, journal articles, monographs and technical (practice) publications where there must be some explicit articulation of the field and its jurisdiction” (Edwards 2012: 10). Johansson and Lindhult (2008) suggest that what is required is a research landscape that is “free from domination and that allows for rational and cooperative search for truth”.

Jahn, Bergmann and Keil (2012: 2-3) argue that “bringing reflexivity into processes of knowledge production is both the claim and main purpose of the transdisciplinary research practice”. Popa *et al.* (2015: 47) argue for systemic integration of reflexive processes within a framework that “integrates broad epistemological and normative orientations”, on the basis of which different methodological options can be envisaged, revised or adjusted through collaborative inquiry and practice, and through further debate, experimentation and evidence. It is therefore evident that going forward South African public relations and communication researchers will have to embrace boundary spanning roles that will enable collaboration between variously situated participants from a variety of disciplinary, social and

institutional contexts, and embrace mechanisms of stakeholder participation to actually transform values, practices and institutions through experimentation, social innovation and collaborative learning. Failure to do so will further reinforce the validity of the functional paradigm, and will further constrain our ability as public relations and communication scholars to resolve complex problems that arise in emergent contexts.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued for the need to span paradigmatic, disciplinary professional boundaries if public relations and communication is to assume the influential role that has been afforded to it in postmodern communication contexts. For far too long public relations and communication practitioners have tried to manage the boundaries of the discipline and practice through the dominance of single-paradigm approaches. For more than two decades the behavioural managerial paradigm has dominated both theorising and practice in the field. In this sense, the constructs that public relations and communication professionals employed had become moral imperatives which served to presuppose certain features of organisation, while excluding the possibility of others. In the process, public relations professionals may have become too closely coupled to the institutions that they served, thus limiting their ability to challenge their own intellectual assumptions.

In response to the modernist emphasis on single, dominant theoretical perspectives and philosophies (meta-narratives) postmodernists embrace multiplicity and diversity, and even question their own theoretical perspectives. As such postmodernism may be seen as characterised by pluralism, fragmentation, ambiguity and indeterminacy, defying attempts to generalise and extrapolate from past experience – thus also rejecting the notion of (normative) theory at the institutional level. Instead postmodernism encourages crossing of paradigmatic boundaries, thus providing for the possibility or the emergence of a multi-paradigmatic strategic approach that differs from integrated communication because it spans all organisational endeavours and activities, and offers the possibility of a coherent multi-methodological approach to naturally multi-paradigmatic problem situations.

The rapid changes that are brought about by developments in communication technologies further challenge communication professionals to transcend boundaries, and enact their roles as boundary spanners by developing multi-paradigmatic approaches to tensions that arise in their field of practice. This article identified four such tensions, and considered the implications that these hold for public relations and communication scholarship. The article concludes that going forward South African public relations and communication researchers will have to embrace boundary spanning roles that will enable collaboration between variously situated participants from a variety of disciplinary, social and institutional contexts, and embrace

mechanisms of stakeholder participation to actually transform values, practices and institutions through experimentation, social innovation and collaborative learning. Failure to do so will further reinforce the centrality and dominance of the functional paradigm, resulting in a recidivist normative state theorised by Zerfass (2009) in which traditional approaches to public relations and communication will be revived. What is required is the rediscovery of the “disciplined imagination” proposed by Weick (1989) if South African public relations and communication scholars are to transcend disciplinary boundaries and move towards a more meaningful contribution in the cooperative search for solutions to complex problems through reflexive knowledge production.

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