
Working at the interface: The descriptive relevance of Grunig and Hunt's theories to public relations practices in south east Queensland schools.

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This article examines the relevance of James Grunig and Todd Hunt's (1984) theories to public relations practitioners' roles in south east Queensland schools. It focuses in particular on the two-way symmetric model in this context. The geographical boundaries of the research mean that this article is intended primarily as an exploratory, descriptive analysis of a specific area rather than an exhaustive treatise on the general topic of public relations in Australian schools. However, it is hoped that it will prove useful in identifying bases for further study and discussion.

This project's theoretical framework comes from Grunig and Hunt's influential work *Managing Public Relations* (1984), which describes four classic public relations models. Grunig and Hunt are among the foremost authors of theory in the field, and their work has been widely critiqued. Although their theories are nearly twenty years old, there have been few major challenges to their importance in the field of public relations, and the text is still widely used and cited in many public relations courses and readings at tertiary level (see for example Grunig & Dozier, 1992; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Rice & Atkin, 2000; and Heath & Vasquez, 2001). However, studies specifically using Grunig and Hunt's four models to analyse public relations in schools are limited (Gallagher, Bagin, & Kindred, 1997), and in Australian schools seemingly non-existent.

In *Managing Public Relations* (1984), Grunig and Hunt identified four theoretical public relations paradigms: press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric, and two-way symmetric. For the purposes of this article, it is appropriate to clearly define these

paradigms, since subsequent discussion hinges on the precise nature of these definitions as given by Grunig and Hunt (1984):

1. *Press agency/publicity*: activities designed to achieve favourable media attention.
2. *Public information*: the one-way distribution of objective information about an organisation to a public. This model has frequently been linked with the concept of public relations as propaganda.
3. *Two-way asymmetric*: a system that allows an organisation to put out its information and to receive feedback from its publics about that information. However, the organisation does not necessarily respond to that feedback in the way the public has requested. Under this model, an organisation would not change a decision as a result of feedback, but might instead concentrate on putting across its preferred option to publics in a more favourable and effective way.
4. *Two-way symmetric*: a model that advocates free and equal information flow between an organisation and its publics, leading to mutual understanding and responsiveness. This may result in either the organisation or its publics being persuaded to change their position. But the model is regarded as equally effective if neither group changes, "as long as both communicate well enough to understand the position of the other" (Grunig & Hunt 1984, p. 23).

Initially, Grunig and Hunt (1984) advocated the symmetric model alone as the ideal form of public relations, but later Grunig (2001)

acknowledged that this model by itself might be inadequate for the contemporary public relations practitioner. Instead he proposed a model somewhere between the symmetric and the asymmetric, a concept that he called “a new model of excellent, two-way public relations” (Grunig, 2001, p.26). However, the inclusion of the principles of two-way symmetric communication was regarded as paramount.

Aims

The aim of this study was to establish which – if any – of Grunig and Hunt’s four models best describes the practice of public relations in schools in south east Queensland. Additionally, it was intended that the normative status of the two-way symmetric model be assessed in this particular context. Such questions make the basic assumption that public relations *is* actually being practiced in these schools: that is, that they have formal, organised relations with their publics. This implicit assumption was also therefore examined in the research for this article. The research was structured around three specific questions:

1. What is the nature of public relations practice in schools in south east Queensland?
2. Are Grunig and Hunt’s theoretical models descriptive of the practice of public relations identified in these schools?
3. Is the normative status of the two-way symmetric model appropriate in schools in south east Queensland?

Methods

Before the methods used in this research are described more closely, it is important to acknowledge that throughout this article the communication relationship between schools and their publics is only considered from the point of view of the schools. In the broader context of

public relations theory, a criticism that is sometimes levelled at the work of Grunig and Hunt is that the organisation becomes the object-viewer and publics are merely reactionary, existing and having importance only as a response to that organisation (see for example Leitch & Neilson 1997, and Botan & Soto, 1998). It is also worth noting that this research has been carried out at a limited number of schools in a limited geographical area, and that resulting idiosyncrasies may make it inappropriate to extrapolate the results further. However, the information derived will provide a starting point for future discussions and research in this area.

With these caveats in mind, two survey instruments – questionnaires and case studies – were addressed to schools in south east Queensland. These instruments combined elements of both quantitative and qualitative research techniques, underpinning the benefits of a qualitative approach with the strengths of a quantitative methodology (for further discussion on this approach see Cox, 1986).

The initial aim of the research was to contact as many schools as possible in south east Queensland across the public and private sectors at both primary and secondary level. All 96 schools on the Gold Coast were contacted, plus an additional 52 in other parts of the target area as defined by Education Queensland (Education Queensland, 2002). Questionnaires were chosen as the best way to seek information from such a large number of respondents. It was important to at least aim for blanket coverage as this is such an uncharted area, and it was vital to obtain as much information as possible. A large sample also reduced the likelihood of “response bias” (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997, p. 161), whereby one or two responses may have a disproportionate effect on outcomes.

Once relevant permission was obtained from Education Queensland and Brisbane Catholic Education, questionnaires were mailed out to all the selected schools. Instructions were given that they were to be completed by the person in the school who had major responsibility for the

school's communications. Questionnaires were also distributed via e-mail within south east Queensland through the database of ADAPE (The Association of Development and Alumni Professionals in Education (Australia)). This channel was chosen as ADAPE is the only dedicated, specialist professional body for schools' public relations practitioners in south east Queensland. The questionnaires were designed to provide some hard statistical facts on the nature of public relations practice in the relevant schools, as well as some descriptive qualitative data.

In addition, public relations practices in three schools were examined in comprehensive case studies, principally by face-to-face interviews. The interviews took place in the interviewees' own offices, after initial contact by telephone and e-mail. A list of questions was supplied in advance, which broadly reflected those in the questionnaire. However, the interviews also addressed specific areas identified from the questionnaire responses as being of interest, such as the role of the practitioner as advocate. Information obtained in this way was rich in depth and detail: the interviews were particularly useful in providing a forum for the discussion of issues raised in responses to the questionnaire.

Subjects

Questionnaires were sent to 148 schools across the four types of school in this study (primary and

secondary, private and state). These labelling distinctions were based on information supplied on the Education Queensland website (Education Queensland, 2002). Responses were received from 56 schools, giving an overall response rate of 38%. Respondents were asked to identify the most appropriate description of their school: 30 (53%) said they were primary schools, 11 (20%) said they were secondary schools, and the remaining 15 (27%) said they were "Other" (this category includes P-Y12 schools, combined primary and secondary schools, Y5-Y12 schools, special schools, and combined childcare/school facilities).

Respondents were asked whether they were in the state or private sector: 61% identified themselves as being in state schools, and 37% as private (2% failed to respond). This ratio is in line with the proportion of state (68%) to private schools (32%) in the geographical area of south east Queensland as a whole (Education Queensland, 2002). This suggests that the sampling methods used were appropriate and effective in obtaining representative responses based on this division.

Case studies were chosen at random from the schools in the area, one from each sector under consideration (see Figure 2 below). The exception was the category of primary private schools, from which no-one agreed to participate. In order to preserve confidentiality (at the request of one of the interviewees), schools that

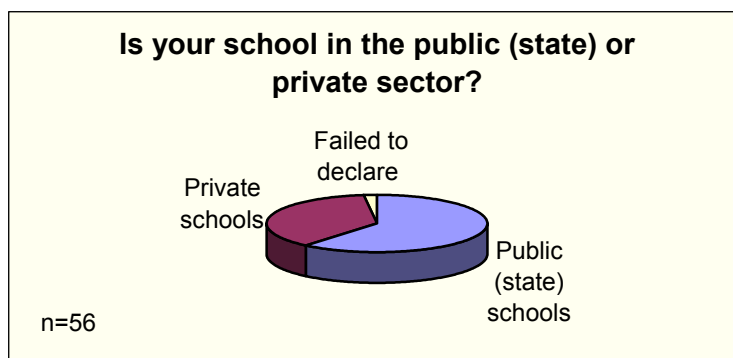


Figure 1 – Is your school in the public (state) or private sector?

	PRIMARY	SECONDARY
PRIVATE	No representation	School W
STATE	School X	School Y

Figure 2 - A summary of the four types of schools participating in case studies

participated in the case studies were allocated an identifying letter.

Geographically, enquiries were restricted to south east Queensland, as there are significant representations of each school type in the area. This approach also allowed consistency in the sampling methods for both the questionnaire and the subsequent case studies, which had to be carried out locally due to limitations on time and budget. Such pragmatic reasoning in the choice of sample populations is regarded as acceptable at this level of research (Daymon & Holloway, 2002).

Findings – Questionnaire

A range of 21 different job descriptions covering the role of public relations practitioners

was identified in the 56 respondent schools. Only two respondents directly acknowledged the term ‘public relations’ in their job titles for these positions, which supports the conclusion that many schools either do not realise that they have public relations officers as such, or prefer not to acknowledge the specific description. By far the most popular job description in this category was ‘Principal’ with 25 (45%) responses. However, answers to this question, and those following, clearly indicated that public relations functions *were* being carried out in the respondent schools.

Schools were asked to indicate whether they communicated with particular groups of people, both within and beyond the school. The designations for these groups were based on informal discussions with current practitioners in the field. The responses received were as follows:

Table 1: Responses to the question “Does your school communicate in any way with any of the following groups? This includes information that you send and/or receive (Please tick all that apply.)”

	Send info to	Receive info from
Parents of current students	56 (100%)	53 (95%)
Parents of prospective students	54 (96%)	46 (82%)
Members of staff	55 (98%)	51 (91%)
Current students	55 (98%)	46 (82%)
Past students	30 (54%)	29 (52%)
The media (TV, radio, papers etc – local or national)	51 (91%)	32 (57%)
Local business community	41 (73%)	34 (68%)
Local householders	28 (50%)	17 (30%)
Politicians (local)	47 (84%)	45 (80%)
Politicians (state or national)	40 (71%)	38 (68%)

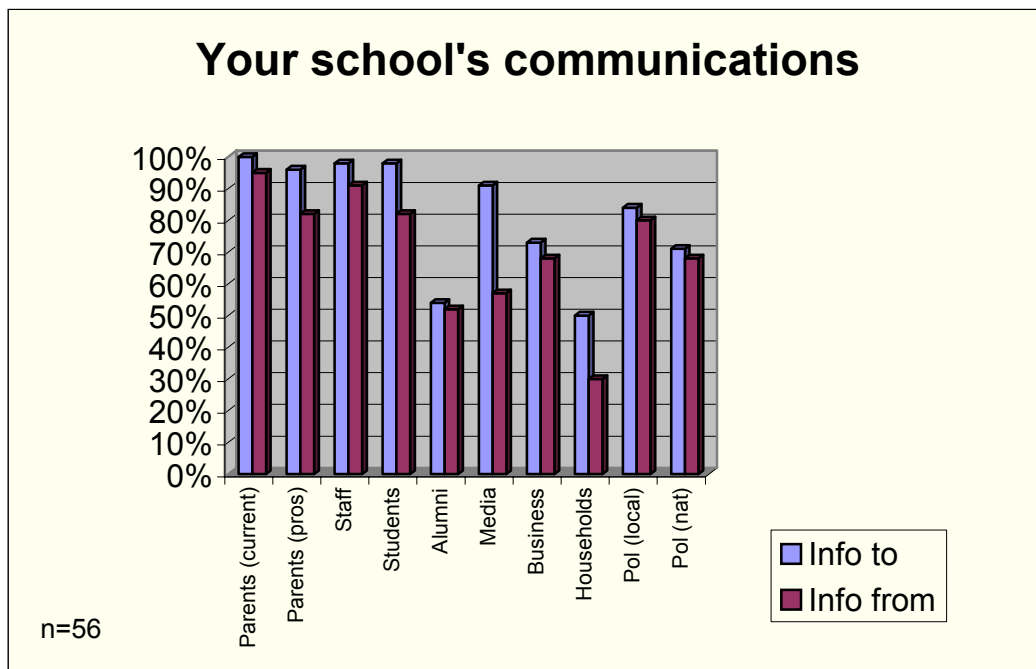


Figure 3 – Your school's communications

Unfortunately, the questionnaire's structure made it difficult to differentiate the various types of communicative action into the categories outlined by Grunig and Hunt (1984). It also failed to distinguish between public relations-driven communication and all other types (such as marketing or legal reporting requirements) so

the value of this particular section in addressing the specific topic under consideration may be limited. However, some broad conclusions may still be reached.

The schools surveyed generally placed more emphasis on out-going communication than incoming. However, the occurrence of inward

communication indicates that schools' communication is not unidirectional, and does in fact incorporate some sort of capability to handle reverse flow. What is not clear from this section of the questionnaire is whether this reverse flow is in response to schools' communication, and shows an on-going dialogue; or whether it is part of a concurrent discourse being conducted independently of what schools say. What is also not clear is the effect of this incoming communication on the output of schools; in other

words, the descriptive relevance of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) symmetric/asymmetric models.

Schools were then asked to identify – from a range of suggestions – what kind of public relations output they generated. The suggestions were made using Kotler, Armstrong, Brown, and Adam's (1998) definition of the major public relations tools: “press relations, product publicity, corporate communications, lobbying, and counselling” (p. 518). Replies were as follows (Table 2):

Table 2 – Responses to the question ‘Does your school have any of the following? (Please tick all appropriate boxes)’

Prospectus	52 (93%)
Newsletter (parents)	56 (100%)
Newsletter (students)	23 (41%)
Newsletter (staff)	27 (48%)
Website	54 (96%)
Press release	49 (88%)
Strategic plan	32 (57%)
Fundraising plan	34 (61%)
P & F or similar	54 (96%)

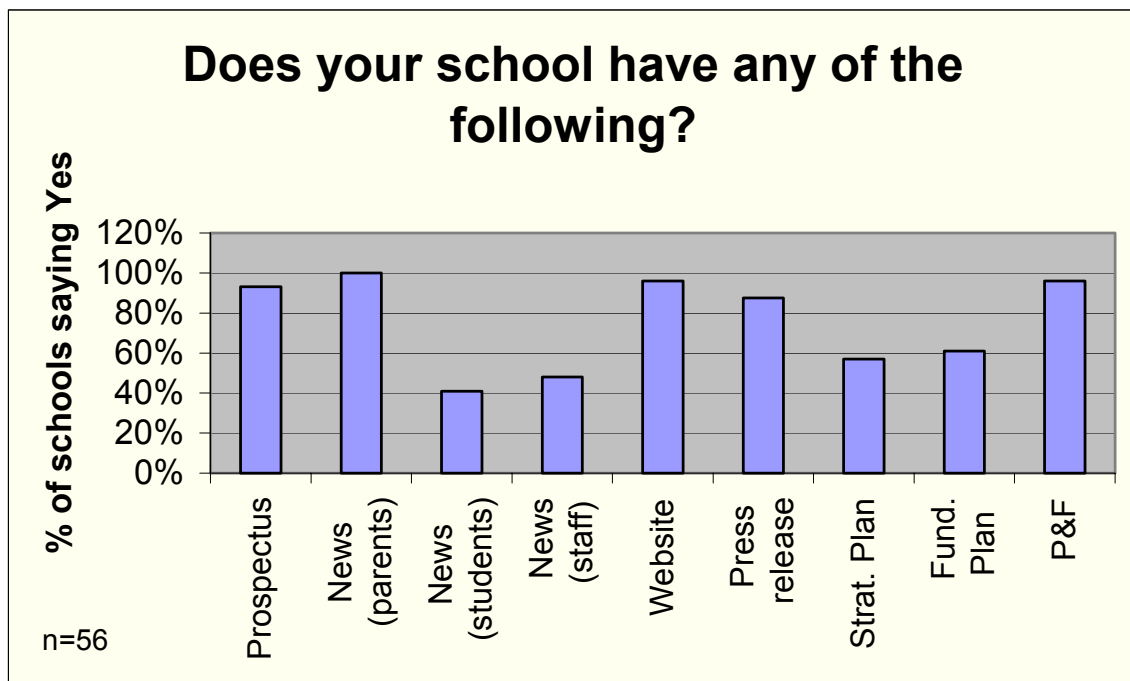


Figure 4 – Does your school have any of the following?

This again is further clear confirmation that public relations is being practiced in the schools under consideration.

Respondents were also asked who was responsible for creating this output. Most schools reported a number of different people sharing the responsibilities for the creation and production of public relations collateral: 35 of the 56 respondents (63%) indicated that three or more different people were involved. Respondents indicated that many members of the school community are involved in the practice of public relations, from the secretary who composes and compiles the weekly newsletter to the administration staff who send out media releases. Public relations functions, with the sole exception of web site management, are practiced exclusively in-house by the respondent schools: most allocated these public relations functions to teachers (in addition to their pedagogical duties) or administrative staff. This would support the conclusion that public relations in schools is being practiced as a technical function, rather than as a specialised, management role.

It was also apparent that there was no significant input acknowledged from non-school personnel in any of the categories, apart from the fundraising plans. Schools are neither seeking input from, nor responding to, input from their publics in the creation of these items, and therefore in the school behaviours and policies they outline. The most likely descriptor of this type of communication – using the theories of Grunig and Hunt (1984) – would therefore be the public information model, although the two-way asymmetric model would be more relevant to promotional communication. In the category of fundraising, various organisations of parents and friends were credited with a significant input, indicating a level of two-way communication.

Of the 34 respondent schools that indicated they had formal fundraising plans, 21 (62%) stated that parents and friends were involved solely or jointly in the construction of those plans. This seems therefore to be an area in

which schools are willing to listen to and act upon the views of members of their publics in the determination of school policy and behaviour; a clear example of two-way symmetric communication in action. More research would be necessary to discover the reason for this accessibility, but perhaps schools feel that as parents are largely responsible for the raising of funds, it is only right that they be involved in the planning.

In response to further questions, all schools indicated that they had sent out enrolment packages containing promotional information in response to telephone enquiries. As this information is subjective and persuasive in its intention, it cannot be classified under the public information model. It may be described as falling under Grunig and Hunt's (1984) definition of two-way symmetric communication in its most literal sense, as the schools are directly responding to a request from a public. However, because the school is not actually changing or modifying its behaviour, and is primarily concerned with sending out communication, it more closely resembles the two-way asymmetric model. Three schools noted that they subsequently rang prospective parents to discuss their responses to the enrolment package, but none noted whether there was any reaction by the school to any issues raised.

Schools were next asked whether they incorporated some sort of consultative group in the governance of their organisation, and if so, what areas these groups addressed. An overwhelming majority (91%) of respondent schools said they did have such groups. They were reported to have responsibility for strategic planning and operations within the schools in a variety of areas. This might indicate that these schools were making a determined effort to create a channel for the free and equal flow of information. However, almost half (47%) of the 51 schools with a consultative group did not acknowledge that the group had any impact on school policy. Two of these explicitly stated that

their group was ineffectual; one school was actually in the process of disbanding its group. Four of the schools with groups made explicit statements about the operations of those groups that could be construed as exemplifying two-way asymmetric communication: for example, “Parent council – no role other than sounding board/advisory” (Private/Secondary). In these cases, the schools highlighted the function of their consultative groups as a means of testing out reactions to their decisions prior to implementation, which is a clear demonstration of two-way asymmetric communication in action. Despite initial appearances, the sphere of discourse that the schools had created did not equate to the Grunig and Hunt (1984) ideal of equal and mutually-responsive contributions by all participants.

The majority of school student councils were used to consider less involved issues, such as fundraising, changes to uniform requirements, social events, and the provision of bubblers for students. One school stated “All matters that are of concern to the students are heard, they are dealt with as seen fit by those in charge of the particular matter in discussion” (Private/Secondary). This is a clear enunciation of the two-way asymmetric principle in action: the school has the mechanism (via the student council) to collect audience feelings and feedback about its decisions, but it does not directly respond to them, nor does it relinquish any of its power in the decision-making process.

By far the most popular area for schools to involve other groups was in the consideration of uniform requirements, which was noted as being directly affected by input from publics in 30 (68%) of the 44 positive responses to this question.

Findings: case studies

The results derived from the case studies made interesting comparisons with those of the questionnaire survey, and both sets of results were broadly concurrent. However, as with the

questionnaire results, the findings can only categorically be said to apply to the respondent schools. Again though, information obtained in this way may have broader inferences, which could be researched in further studies. (Note that respondents are referred to by the name of their school). For example, only one of the practitioners (School Y) had the words ‘public relations’ specifically mentioned in her job title, which was a reflection of the conclusion drawn from the questionnaire that this is a term avoided by most schools. School Y’s practitioner suggested a possible reason for this reluctance to use the specific phrase ‘public relations’ in job descriptions:

Schools are a bit scared of using the term ‘public relations’ because the business of schools is all about educating people – it’s not been so much about being actively corporate.

(School Y)

However, it seems that the interviewees’ schools are beginning to take an “actively corporate” approach to building relationships with their publics. This is reflected in the fact that both School W and School Y have formally created public relations practitioners’ posts in the past 18 months. This may be indicative of a growing realisation of the relevance and significance for schools of actively managing a set of broader relationships with their publics; and an awareness that this is best achieved by the use of corporate tools, such as public relations. It would also explain why there are as yet no dedicated professional groups in Australia equivalent to the American National Schools Public Relations Association (NSPRA), although ADAPE is an alternative. The process of differentiating public relations practitioners from teaching/administrative staff in the schools under consideration is still in its infancy: most public relations work is carried out by teachers at a technical level in combination with their pedagogical duties, as in the case of School X.

None of the interviewees who agreed to take part were actually the principals of their schools, but all had nominated themselves as the person mainly responsible for the conduct of their school's relationships with its publics. However, each interviewee made mention of the fact that their principal played a decisive role in the decision-making process. School Y said:

The vision or image of the school very much comes from the Principal. We to-and-fro on things and my role is to actualise her corporate vision of School Y in the future. I have quite a key role in decision-making, but my main role is to actualise her vision.

(School Y)

This may, therefore, give weight to the conclusion that although principals were prominent in completing the questionnaires, and are instrumental in determining school policy, they are not necessarily actually responsible for carrying out public relations functions in schools. It also reinforces the earlier finding that public relations is carried out in this context as a technical function, rather than as a strategic, managerial function.

All the interviewees were very forthcoming on the topic of information flows from schools to their respective publics. Many and varied examples were given of the way in which schools communicate, including verbally in assemblies and in pastoral care sessions, and in writing through newsletters and e-mails. The main function of these communications was explicitly stated to be information dissemination from schools to their publics: for example School Y commented that her school magazine was "mainly about getting information out there" (*School Y*). This underlines the significance of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) public information model of communication in this context. In contrast, when asked about the flow of communication from publics *into* schools all three interviewees had comparatively little

response: this is a pattern which is again indicative of the unbalanced flow of communication typical of the public information and two-way asymmetric models.

Interviewees were asked about their roles as advocates for the school rather than as simple channels for information flows: inherent in this concept of advocacy is the notion of persuasion of dissenting factions, and the prioritising of organisational objectives, which are the hallmarks of asymmetric communication. School X gave some answers that clearly pointed to the existence of a two-way asymmetric flow of communication in her school:

There was something of that [advocacy] when we were bringing in changes to the curriculum framework. Maths and English were going to be taught separately and HPE and SOSE were going to be combined into integrated studies. We included hints about these changes in the newsletter for parents and monitored any comments; but there weren't many. Then we organised a sit-down meeting with those parents who required more explanation before we went ahead with the changes.

(School X)

This is a very clear example of two-way asymmetric communication: the school made a decision about an issue, presented that decision to its public/s, received feedback, and then adjusted its information flow to address issues raised before going on to implement its original decision.

Examples of two-way symmetric communication were much harder to find. However, School W provided two explicit examples of this process in action, for example:

We [his department] were initiators of the bus runs. We thought there was a need for a school bus, but the school weren't really interested. It had been tried before

and hadn't succeeded. But we went out and surveyed families in areas covered by the proposed routes and went back to the school. We pointed out that it would be cutting student travelling time in half for some, and that it would be helpful in seeding enrolments. We suggested using our own buses and drivers, so that it would be easier to keep direct control over things. Another important aspect was that having our own service would avoid rivalry [with other schools] at the interchange, which would help keep a clean profile for the school. We were looking to raise the school's profile and keep it clean, and we thought the bus was a good idea. Eventually the school said yes, and it's been a huge success.

(School W)

This is a clear example of two-way symmetric communication in action, with the school making a shift in its position to accommodate the expressed needs of a public. The fact that it was the public relations practitioner who identified the need among the public does not compromise the symmetry of the process.

School X was unable to offer any examples of instances where she had acted as an advocate for publics in their communication with the school. This suggests that the two-way symmetric communication model has little application in that school. School Y felt this type of advocacy fell beyond her remit, and that her role was "more about the school out" (School Y). This highlights a recurrent theme in all three interviews, that no one person was responsible for all the public relations functions we were discussing. When asked about the proportion of her time spent communicating with each group, one interviewee responded:

Impossible to say, because it's impossible for just one person to deal with all the communications. Many different people are involved, such as

teachers, senior teachers, the deputy and the principal. *(School X)*

This fully supports the findings of the questionnaire, that responsibility for the generation of schools' public relations output in the respondent sample is spread across a number of individuals, usually teaching staff.

Another questionnaire result that is supported by the findings of the case studies is the range of areas that these schools are discussing with their publics. Each school in the case studies specifically mentioned changing its uniform policy in response to requests from students and/or parents. This is in line with the high proportion of schools that identified this issue in their responses to the questionnaire.

The question of the relevance of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models of symmetric and asymmetric communication was best determined by an examination of some of the additional comments schools made in the questionnaires. Several schools made observations that seemed to bring their actions under the heading of two-way asymmetric communication, for example:

"Involvement in Interschool sport challenged (by staff) – discussed, not changed." State/Primary. (It is arguable that the school might have concluded these discussions with an enhanced understanding and appreciation of the staff's point of view, which would render this communication flow more appropriate to the two-way symmetric model.)

"Parents have a right to comment on policy before it is implemented. It is distributed by the school newsletter and the parents has [sic] a week to respond." Private/Primary.

Such annotations clearly indicate school systems where information is received but not necessarily acted upon. Other schools made comments that implied their public relations communications were much more symmetric in nature.

“A parent recently suggested that we lower our fees as a number of her friends wanted to enrol their children in the school but could not afford it. After discussing the matter with her we decided to take her suggestion and lower our fees.” Private/Primary.

“Being a relatively new school a lot of things have been implemented as a result of parent, teacher, and student input.” State/Primary.

Some schools took an approach that combined elements of both symmetric and asymmetric communication.

“Changes to uniform occurred after parents were surveyed on their preferences. This was instigated following complaints from parents that our yellow shirt stained too easily (red dirt). The students had input into final design.” State/Primary.

This shows that the school responded directly to the requests of one group (the parents) in deciding its policy (symmetric communication); and also incorporated suggestions from another group (students) on the fine details once that decision had been made (asymmetric communication).

However, one respondent also noted that there were constraints and limitations to the amount of flexibility that could be offered in schools’ relationships with their publics.

“Although we are independent in terms of operations, many of our policies would reflect those of other schools in the [...] system.” Private/Other.

This supports the tentative suggestions put forward earlier that schools may be constrained in their operations by external factors beyond their control, which might make the establishment of two-way symmetric communication an impossibility in many circumstances.

Conclusions

The combination of results from the written questionnaire and the case studies lead to several conclusions. These conclusions apply directly only to those schools surveyed, although some wider inferences may be drawn for the design of future testing. Such conclusions may best be presented by referring back to the initial research questions.

1. What is the nature of public relations practice in schools in south east Queensland?

It is apparent from this study that public relations is being practiced in the schools surveyed. However, it may also be said that practitioners in some schools in south east Queensland are largely not trained for the role they carry out. In addition, they often combine public relations activities with teaching and/or administrative work: Principals identify themselves as most often responsible for conducting schools’ public relations in addition to their other duties. This supports the conclusion that the public relations role in these schools does not have a clear independent identity, and is likely to be carried out in a technical fashion. The main targets for schools’ public relations communications are internal to the school system; and practitioners are primarily communicating in a two-way asymmetric fashion, acting as advocates for their schools to these audiences.

2. Are Grunig and Hunt’s theoretical models descriptive of the practice of public relations identified in these schools?

Firstly, it appears that the type of public relations communication fitting the press agency/publicity paradigm is of little or no significance in south east Queensland schools, if

the definitions given by Grunig and Hunt (1984) are strictly applied. While these schools may have events to which the press are invited, such as the special assemblies in School W and School Y, they are not for the most part primarily devised to obtain favourable coverage by the media. They are intended “more to celebrate our students’ achievements than to raise our school’s profile” (School Y): securing press coverage is not the motivation for staging these events. A literal application of Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) theories therefore indicates the inappropriate descriptive nature of this particular model in this context.

Secondly, the public information model of public relations is of surprisingly little descriptive relevance in schools, despite Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) assertions that “government, nonprofit associations, business” (p. 22) – descriptions which cover the schools in this research – rely heavily on this form. This is because much public relations communication that might otherwise belong in this category is actually excluded by Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) qualifier that the function of such communication should only be to “report *objectively* about [an] organization to the public” (p. 22, italics added). In determining whether schools’ public relations communications come under the heading of “public information”, all information of an overtly promotional, subjective type – such as brochures and leaflets, which put a positive “spin” on a school’s image – has therefore been discounted. The inclusion of most media-covered press events would also be inappropriate to this category, as this is information presented in such a way as to convey a very positive, subjective image of the school.

Thirdly, it is suggested by the information gathered in this study that the two-way asymmetric model is the most widespread form of public relations communication in these schools, based on Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) theories. In both the questionnaires and the case studies, schools indicated how important it was to “explain management’s view to the public”

(Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 39) and to persuade the public/s to support that view: this is a clear indication that two-way asymmetric communication is taking place.

Finally, it is clear that examples of the two-way symmetric model appear comparatively infrequently in the context of school public relations in south east Queensland. Very few schools gave any examples of truly symmetric communication, although many gave instances where they *believed* this was occurring (which may indicate a feeling that this type of communication is desirable). However, most of these latter instances were actually indicative of discussions taking place within a pre-determined agenda, where a school was simply trying to ascertain the outcome most likely to be accepted by its publics: this is therefore communication which is asymmetric in nature.

3. Is the normative status of the two-way symmetric model appropriate in schools in south east Queensland?

The negotiated, sensitive, and equal communication undertaken in the two-way symmetric model is strongly valorised as the best way for public relations in general to be conducted (see for example Grunig & Hunt 1984; Gallagher, Bagin, & Kindred, 1997; Grunig, 2001; Hughes, 1988; Hughes & Hooper, 2000; Kowalski, 1996, and Van Slyke, 1997). For example – and in specific relation to schools – Gallagher et al. (1997) state that the school and its publics should be involved in an on-going reflexive dialogue. They specifically refer to Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) two-way symmetric paradigm as the normative form for this dialogue, and advocate that schools strive to achieve this reflexivity and responsiveness in their communications.

However, this research has significant implications for the normative status in this context of two-way symmetric communication. Schools’ public relations practitioners in some south east Queensland schools are either:

- *unaware* of the existence and relevance of two-way symmetric communication, perhaps due to a lack of specialist training; or are
- *unwilling* to use this framework in their work, as it would mean relinquishing schools' perceived power in their relationships with other groups; or they are
- *unable* to use the model, due to systemic constraints and/or the technical level at which public relations functions are carried out in these schools.

A lack of awareness of the potential to communicate symmetrically, and/or an unwillingness to do so, does not necessarily prejudice the normative status of the paradigm. However, an *inability* to implement such strategies would arguably have more wide-reaching implications. Given these considerations, it may therefore be necessary to begin a discussion about devising a new form of normative paradigm for the conduct of public relations in schools in Australia, one that develops the findings of this preliminary study.

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