
A history of public relations scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand: From working on the margins to setting disciplinary agendas

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For a small nation geographically situated on the edge of the world, Aotearoa New Zealand has made an extraordinarily significant contribution to public relations research. Academics based in this country have played a lead role in developing new theoretical paradigms in the public relations discipline and in challenging established normative disciplinary ideologies.

In this article I outline the history of public relations research in New Zealand, identifying key individuals, events, and institutions, as well as strategically important relationships with researchers and institutions overseas that have contributed to these developments. This is a genealogical narrative of the activities, publications, and people who have put public relations research from this country on the international disciplinary map. It is not a precisely minuted sequential listing of events. While it might be interesting to provide such a chronicle of activity, the sheer quantity of research conducted, reported, and published made doing so an impossible task. The aim has been instead to emphasise how and why New Zealand researchers have been so successful in persuading a global community of scholars of the value of alternative ways of researching and theorising public relations, and, more recently, in setting agendas in public relations research.

When public relations was first introduced as a subject of study in New Zealand's tertiary education sector the focus was on developing business managers' understanding of its techniques and training them its practice. This vocational emphasis dominated New Zealand public relations education for well over three decades. It is with a brief overview of how public relations entered

and initially evolved within the tertiary education sector that I therefore begin.

From technical training to a field of research enquiry

The first tertiary education course in public relations was offered in New Zealand in 1962 by Wellington Polytechnic with the support of the Wellington Branch of the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) (Peart, 1994). The Wellington course was the only tertiary offering in the field until Massey University introduced communication papers into its Graduate Diploma in Business and Administration in 1980. In the mid-1980s, Auckland Institute of Technology (AIT) began making its contribution to the discipline by way of a diploma level course in public relations. In 1986 Massey University put on its first named undergraduate papers in the field (Public Relations and Special Topic in Public Relations) and in 1988 AIT's new School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations began teaching the country's first named public relations qualification - the National Diploma in Public Relations (Peart, 1994).

The 1990s saw the steady evolution of public relations as a subject area in New Zealand tertiary institutions. In 1990 the University of Waikato introduced papers in Public Relations Practice and Advanced Public Relations to its Bachelor of Management Studies taught by the Waikato Management School. In 1991 Massey first offered its undergraduate major 'Communication Management' within its Bachelor of Business Studies, and in 1992 introduced New Zealand's first postgraduate public relations paper, focusing on strategic communication and including a reflective practical project. Massey

and AIT largely led the early developments in public relations education in New Zealand and emphasised technical training, ethics, and professionalisation in their teaching. However, in 1999, when the University of Waikato established the first undergraduate major in Public Relations taught at a New Zealand university through its new interdisciplinary Bachelor of Communication Studies, it did so with the explicit intent of also growing public relations as an academic research discipline in this country.

New Zealand's first public relations focused publication, Peart and Macnamara's (1987) *The New Zealand public relations handbook*, was designed to cater to the needs of tertiary educators, students, and practitioners. Joseph Peart, a lecturer at AIT, had extensive practitioner experience prior to entering the education sector, and this practical handbook outlined different types of public relations practice, how to conduct media relations, appropriate use of various promotional media, lobbying, and methods of evaluating and measuring public relations activities. It included a selection of case studies, not only from New Zealand, but also from Australia and Singapore. However, the book actually comprised a reprint of Australian-based Jim Macnamara's *Public relations handbook for managers and executives* (1984) with the addition of some basic New Zealand detail. A second edition of Peart and Macnamara's text was published in 1996, again heavily based on a revised edition of Macnamara's (1996) book. The *Handbook* did not present New Zealand perspectives on public relations or research into professional practice in this country. There was as yet no sense of capturing a culturally specific approach to practice or scholarship despite the unique communication landscape within New Zealand's bicultural society. Although empirical studies of public relations practice - such as Margie Comrie's (1997) study of the media relations tactics of health organisations - were underway, it was researchers from the University of Waikato who would lead the sustained development of research inquiry into public relations in New Zealand. Their

research agenda was described as focused on "understanding the role that public relations practitioners have played in major social, cultural, and political events in recent New Zealand history" (Motion & Leitch, 2001, p. 661).

A social-cultural and scholarly activist agenda

While developments in public relations teaching at the University of Waikato may appear to have been slower in evolving than at Massey and AIT (the latter becoming Auckland University of Technology (AUT) when it was granted university status in 2000), they were underpinned by the strategic recruitment of research staff and doctoral students from both New Zealand and overseas who would expound alternative ways of investigating and theorising public relations as a communication practice.

Shirley Leitch, who gained a doctorate in Political Communication from the University of Auckland in 1986, headed-up this recruitment strategy as Chair of the Department of Management Communication at Waikato Management School from 1995 to 1998. The Department had been established in 1993 and its teaching staff included Judy Motion and Juliet Roper who were both studying for doctorates under Leitch and who would, along with Leitch, lead and participate in many initiatives that would bring New Zealand-based public relations research and theory to the attention of international scholars. Leitch's recruitment of staff to the department was partly dependent on a 'grow your own' strategy, partly on bringing in internationally acclaimed visiting academics, and partly on identifying and employing like minded critical theorists from other disciplines who were interested in developing critical perspectives on public relations. By 1998 Leitch had recruited Scotsman David McKie from his then home in Australia and supervised New Zealand's first PhD in Public Relations, Motion's (1997a) investigation of the creation of public personae by women politicians. Leitch and her colleagues also developed a network of like-minded scholars from not only Australasia, but

also the UK and the USA who would begin to “seriously question the intellectual foundations” (Leitch & Walker, 1997, p. vii) of public relations as an academic discipline. Marking these researchers out as different was their application of European poststructuralist and cultural theories, especially those developed by Habermas, Foucault, and Fairclough, to public relations research and analysis.

The particular approach to public relations research and theory for which New Zealand, and more precisely, Waikato Management School, became internationally known in the late 1990s, developed partly in reaction to models of public relations espoused in North America (McKie & Munshi, 2004). From the mid-1980s and well into the first decade of the twenty-first century, ‘excellence theory’ dominated the discipline. Informed by social scientific positivist research and based in systems theory, the excellence project, led by James Grunig at the University of Maryland, theorised how public relations could function most effectively in supporting organisations to achieve their goals (Weaver, 2011). Consequently, four models of public relations were identified: press agency, public information, one-way scientific persuasion, and two-way symmetrical communication. The last was heralded as the most ethical form of public relations practice. It was a model that depicted best practice public relations as working in, and for, the public interest and as an inherently democratic, relationship-building activity (Grunig & White, 1992).

However, New Zealand-based academics with backgrounds in political communication, media, cultural and social theory, and who had a strong commitment to supporting alternative, qualitative, interpretative and critical approaches to understanding public relations, set about demonstrating that the excellence model contained particular flaws and biases. Apparently these were not evident to excellence theorists themselves, and indeed, New Zealand academics have posited these theorists as blinded by their own science (McKie, 1997) and so embedded in, and

wedded to, ideologies of the marketplace that they were unable to see how their own cultural prejudices were privileging economic interests over wider public interest and wellbeing (Weaver, 2011). It may be the case that being located far from the generative centre of these theories gave New Zealand academics the opportunity to test and critique them without fear or favour – certainly an alternative way of looking at public relations characterised a whole group of New Zealand-based scholars in the late 20th Century.

Taking New Zealand perspectives to the world

The first significant foray into the American territory of public relations research which challenged excellence arguments about the social function of public relations came with Motion and Leitch’s (1996) *Public Relations Review* article ‘A discursive perspective from New Zealand: Another world view’. Motion and Leitch brought Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Theory (CDA) to bear on the analysis of public relations, arguing that the notion of symmetrical communication failed to recognise public relations practitioners’ strategic use of discourse to shape and determine public support for organisational activities. Providing new lenses through which to understand the social, cultural, and political role of public relations practitioners, they argued:

Viewed from a discourse-centered perspective, public relations practitioners can be seen to strategically deploy texts in discursive struggles over sociocultural practices. The aim of such discursive struggles is to maintain or to transform these sociocultural practices and the values and attitudes which support them and which they embody. Public relations practitioners are thus viewed as discourse technologists who play a central role in the maintenance and transformation of discourse. (p. 298).

To demonstrate how public relations practitioners were involved in these discursive struggles, Motion and Leitch drew on their

experiences of, and research into, consultation processes and practices used to implement environmental, labour relations, and education policies in New Zealand and Australia.

Motion and Leitch were not the first to argue that social and critical theories provided a better understanding of how public relations was practised, and how it worked to the strategic advantage of those with the power to colonise social discourses. American researchers (for examples, see Coombs, 1993; Creedon, 1993; Hon, 1995; Moffit, 1994; Olasky, 1987; Pearson, 1992) had already raised issues with the assumptions underpinning the normative public relations paradigm and its inadequate conception of power. What New Zealand-based academics did was to consciously and persistently challenge that paradigm, or, as Motion and Leitch (2001) described it, 'grand narrative theory' of public relations. Such a challenge could very likely only have come from outside the USA given that, as L'Etang (1997, p. 41) argued "within North America ... a coalition of established scholars [were] in a position to control access to publishing outlets". That control over who, and what, was published in public relations journals and by leading book publishers may have made it difficult for any significant confrontation to the prevalence of excellence theories to be mounted within the US.

The first full-blown organised assault on excellence theory came at the International Communication Association conference in Montreal in May 1997 through the panel 'UnAmerican public relations: Global differences in theory and practice'. The presenters comprised: David McKie, then still at Edith Cowan University, Australia; Gae Synnott, also from Edith Cowan; Magda Pieczka, from the University of Stirling, Scotland; and Shirley Leitch, from the University of Waikato. Chaired by Roslyn Petelin from Queensland University of Technology, the panel emphasised alternative ways of understanding and theorising public relations practice. This marked the beginning of an international conversation about how

public relations theory had been "isolated from recent developments in social and cultural theory" (Leitch & Walker, 1997, p. vii). The dialogue continued at the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Conference at University of La Trobe, Australia, in July 1997, and culminated in Roslyn Petelin, editor of the *Australian Journal of Communication (AJC)*, supporting Shirley Leitch and Gael Walker to guest edit a special issue of the journal entitled 'Public relations on the edge'. The special issue contained articles from four New Zealand-based researchers, Shirley Leitch, David Neilson, David McKie, and Judy Motion, all by then based at the University of Waikato, as well as contributions from authors based in Scotland, the US, and Australia.

Leitch and Neilson's (1997) *AJC* article 'Reframing public relations: New directions for theory and practice' deconstructed how excellence theory was using the notion of publics. A particular focus of criticism was how the two-way symmetrical model theorised publics as having equal power in negotiation and dialogue as organisations, and indeed how, within that model, publics were represented as interchangeable with the organisation. Drawing on Habermas' theories of the public sphere and communicative action, and Fairclough's theories of discourse, Leitch and Neilson argued that publics could not be theorised as stable, fixed, and singular in their identity relationships with organisations. Publics were identified as having a multiplicity of identities, as the *subjects* of public relations strategy, and as constructed and reconstructed by public relations discourse. This reconceptualisation of publics significantly complicated what had been treated up to this point as a simplistic concept in public relations theory.

Motion's (1997b) *AJC* article similarly argued for a more sophisticated understanding of commonly used public relations concepts, in this case, those of image and identity. It explored how New Zealand female politicians were both positioned by, and positioned themselves through, discourses and multiple subject positions, and the challenges this brought for political public relations advisors

and publicists. McKie's (1997) article in the same special issue, drawing on theories of catastrophe, chaos, and complexity, argued that it was essential for public relations scholarship to engage with a wider range of philosophical disciplines and epistemologies beyond linear scientific self-interested managerialist perspectives of control, if the field was to gain any academic credibility.

Building momentum and alliances

Many of the arguments espoused by Leitch, Neilson, Motion and McKie in the *AJC* 1997 special issue, were further developed in other publications. In *Public Relations Review*, Leitch and Roper (1998) presented a theory of 'genre colonisation' as a discursive public relations strategy involving the representation of politically partisan material in formats which audiences usually associated with balanced current affairs debate. Their arguments were illustrated through the analysis of political talkback material presented on Radio Pacific, a New Zealand talkback radio station. This was followed by Motion and Leitch's (1999) 'Against grand narratives: Localised knowledges of public relations' published in the inaugural issue of the *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*. That issue also featured an article by Debashish Munshi, then a doctoral student studying under McKie at Waikato and who was soon appointed to a lectureship there. Munshi's (1999) article 'Requisitioning variety: Photographic metaphors, ethnocentric lenses, and the divided colours of public relations' introduced postcolonial theory to public relations and argued that the discipline privileged the perspectives of the western cultural elite (see also, Munshi & Kurian, 2005). Munshi encouraged public relations research and theory to take lessons from other disciplines and adopt more multicultural perspectives.

Meanwhile, McKie and his Australian colleague Louise Hunt (1999) warned that if public relations failed to develop its own distinct identity as a pedagogical discipline it was in danger of being trounced by the "superiority complexes of declining fields ...

such as journalism, and the imperialistic ambitions of expansive fields, such as marketing" (p. 55). They argued that "In an increasingly global world it will also need to be more sensitive to varying cultural, national and geopolitical, as well as institutional, contexts" (p. 55). In the same year, Kay Weaver, who came from the University of Stirling to Waikato, first to the Department of Film and Television Studies and later moving to the Department of Management Communication, and Carolyn Michelle, from Waikato's Department of Women and Gender Studies, introduced a feminist discursive analysis to the mix of approaches being used to investigate New Zealand public relations. They demonstrated how dependency on sponsorship funding had compromised a New Zealand national police campaign designed to reduce domestic violence (Weaver & Michelle, 1999).

The significance of the work done by New Zealand-based public relations scholars not only rested in their ability to publish original and challenging research and theory. The alliances built with other international researchers, most notably Jacquie L'Etang and Magda Pieczcka (then at the University of Stirling), George Cheney (then at the University of Montana), and Robert Heath (from the University of Houston, Texas), were vital in gaining support and credibility for their agenda to promote different, and particularly critically informed, understandings of public relations. The relationship with Heath was especially valuable in helping to access some pole positions in public relations publishing in the US. Leitch and Walker had published a short article by Heath (1997) in the *AJC* 'Public Relations on the Edge' special issue. There, Heath debated, but also encouraged the challenges posed for public relations theory building by critical theorists, especially around "issues of epistemology and truth seeking" (p. 57).

Unlike some American scholars who contested the value of critical public relations theory (e.g. Grunig, 2001), Heath embraced researchers from the margins who challenged normative models of public relations. Indeed, it was Heath who escorted those researchers into

the ‘Royal Court’ of public relations when he published two chapters, one by McKie (2001), the other by Leitch and Neilson (2001) (a substantial revision and extension of their 1997 *AJC* article) in the front ‘Defining the discipline’ section of Sage’s *Handbook of public relations*. McKie’s provocative chapter built on his previous calls for chaos, complexity and postmodern theories to be used to “extend the discipline’s conceptual bases” (p. 75). There he declared that the ‘body of knowledge’ that defined public relations was so debilitating limited that it was working to “reduce the field’s conceptual resources, reinforce a low academic and intellectual status, and restrict responsiveness to changing conditions” (p. 75). A further chapter, Motion and Leitch’s (2001) ‘New Zealand perspectives on public relations’ (a variation on their 1999 *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal* article) featured in the ‘Globalizing Public Relations’ section of the *Handbook*. This chapter stated that “scholars at the University of Waikato have worked to theorize public relations in a way that fits the New Zealand context. ... [T]hey have begun to build an indigenous body of public relations theory” (p. 661). In hindsight, this statement was overly optimistic in its suggestion of associations between the public relations theory building taking place at Waikato and Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand. Leitch and Motion had been collaborating with their Māori Waikato Management School colleague, Peraha Richards (Richards, Leitch & Motion, 1998) to bring Māori perspectives to the attention of the communication discipline. However, while that work was picked up and reprinted elsewhere (Richards, Leitch & Motion, 2000), neither these scholars nor any others have actually succeeded in building an indigenous body of public relations theory. In fact, as is discussed further below, there remains a serious lack of discussion of public relations in the context of the bicultural politics of New Zealand. What New Zealand public relations researchers were constructing at the time was a new paradigm of public relations, one that

purposefully resisted and challenged what was considered an imperialist US influenced dominant worldview.

The years from 1996 to 2001 were important for New Zealand public relations scholarship. There was a time when key researchers campaigned through empirical investigation, publishing, conference presentations and networking, to gain a place for the sociocultural turn in public relations theory. The next decade would see that research activity proliferate as those pioneering these perspectives – from what has more recently been named the ‘New Zealand School’ (L’Etang, 2008; Macnamara, 2012) – were accepted into the ‘dominant coalition’ of international public relations scholarship. It would also see new researchers add their voices and perspectives to New Zealand public relations research.

The flowering of New Zealand public relations scholarship

Since the turn of the 21st century there has been a maturing of public relations scholarship in New Zealand and the quantity of publication output has grown exponentially. A number of researchers have continued to play a lead role in internationally advocating for social and cultural perspectives in public relations theorising (for examples, see Munshi & McKie, 2001; Motion & Leitch, 2000; Motion, 2005; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Weaver, 2001; Weaver, Motion & Roper, 2006), with Roper (2005) adding an influential critique of symmetrical public relations communication to the mix. She posited that where organisations consented to public demands for changes in policy and practice, these were largely hegemonic concessions designed to maintain their legitimacy and the right to operate. That work also informed Weaver, Motion and Roper’s (2006) exploration of the philosophical and semantic relationships between public relations and propaganda published as the lead chapter in L’Etang and Pieczka’s (2006) *Public relations: Critical debates and contemporary practice*.

There was also a growing interest and specialism among New Zealand public relations

researchers in specific environmental, social, cultural and political issues and the communication management of these. For example, Weaver and Motion (2002), Motion and Weaver (2005), and, later, Weaver (2010; 2013) investigated the discursive struggles involved in strategic communication of the new and controversial science of genetic modification (GM) by New Zealand corporate and activist organisations. Alison Henderson, a PhD student of Weaver and Cheney, and later lecturer in Waikato's Department of Management Communication, also researched public understanding of and activist campaigns around GM (Henderson & Weaver, 2003; Henderson, 2005), as well as Fonterra and the Kiwi fruit industry's strategic communication of their GM policies (Henderson, Weaver & Cheney, 2007). Much of this research was funded by a Foundation for Research, Science and Technology grant won in 2003 by Motion, Leitch, Weaver and Sally Davenport, a colleague at Victoria University's Business School, to investigate socially and culturally sustainable biotechnology, of which communication about biotechnology was a component part. Motion and Leitch, while they continued to research and publish on GM and management communication issues, left New Zealand for positions in Australia in 2006.

Other New Zealand-based researchers were also writing about GM. Margie Comrie (2005a), an active public relations educator member of PRINZ who had taught and researched journalism and public relations (see Comrie, 2000; 2002; 2005b) at Massey University since the 1990s, also investigated impediments to the development of dialogic, two-way symmetrical communication on the issue. Meanwhile, Doug Ashwell (2009), a then-PhD student working with Comrie, and now lecturer in the School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing at Massey, explored the contribution to the GM debate by news sources.

Sustainability issues and their communication became a focus for a number of public relations researchers. David McKie and Christopher Galloway (2007; 2009), the

latter then at Swinburne University in Australia and now at Massey University, warned of the reputational dangers for the public relations industry if it did not act as a globally responsible force for sustainability in the strategic management of the climate change debate. Roper, Collins and Toledano (2004), Margalit Toledano having joined the Department of Management Communication at Waikato in 2003, also investigated the communication of climate change. Roper (for example, 2004; 2012) not only published on sustainability but won two prestigious Royal Society Marsden grants in 2004 and 2010 to investigate environment and sustainability issues. Additionally, demonstrating the significance of the level of achievement of New Zealand's public relations researchers, Roper along with colleagues Weaver and Zorn, won two Ministry of Research, Science and Technology New Zealand Science and Technology Dialogue Fund Awards in 2002 and 2004 to research the communicative properties of science and technology dialogue and stakeholder engagement with the science community (Roper, Weaver & Zorn, 2005; Roper, Zorn & Weaver, 2004). In 2010, Munshi, with his colleague from Waikato's Department of Political Science and Public Policy, Priya Kurian, won a Marsden Grant to investigate sustainable citizenship and public engagement with new and emerging technologies. In the same year Alison Henderson won a Fast Start Marsden (awarded to early career academics) to research the issue of healthy foods and the balancing of organisational tensions in private and public agendas. The track records these Waikato researchers had developed in public relations and communication scholarship played a vital role both in securing these grant contracts, and in their understanding the importance of meaningful public engagement around controversial social issues.

While New Zealand public relations researchers became adept at gaining significant grant funding to support their research, often in directions that would take them beyond the boundaries of public relations, they also became influential in journal publishing, not

only through their own publications, but by way of invitations to editorial boards, editing of journals, and special editions of journals.

Shaping agendas through journal editing and book publications

In 2004, New Zealand became the home of *PRism*, a free-access, online, peer-refereed public relations and communication research journal, when Elspeth Tilley moved from Australia's Bond University to teach public relations at Massey University, Wellington. Tilley, who has published extensively on public relations ethics since coming to New Zealand (see, for example, Tilley, 2005; 2009; 2011; 2012; Tilley, Fredricks & Hornett, 2012), launched *PRism* in 2003. It has proved an important vehicle for international public relations scholarship, attracting submissions from researchers across the globe, including many leading figures in the field as authors and special issue editors. However, while researchers from overseas have embraced *PRism*, as have New Zealand researchers from other disciplines (see, for example, Janson & Desmarais, 2006), surprisingly few New Zealand public relations scholars have published in the journal (exceptions are, among others, Ashwell, 2012; Hopkins, 2005). This is may be partly due to the Tertiary Education Commission's Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) assessment that encourages publication in high-ranking international journals over and above local journals, and values international collaborations over national ones (Henderson, Simpson & Weaver, 2010).

While *PRism's* being based in New Zealand means we currently have our own public relations journal in this country, researchers have also taken roles on the editorial boards of other international journals. McKie and Toledano serve on the Board of *Public Relations Review*, and Henderson and Munshi on the Board of *Journal of Public Relations Research*. Roper, Toledano and Weaver serve on the Board of Sage's new *Public Relations Inquiry*,

launched in 2012 and intended as a space for the ongoing presentation of social, critical and cultural theory perspectives on public relations and debate about the discipline. McKie and Munshi (2005) additionally edited a special issue of *Public Relations Review* entitled 'Global public relations: A different perspective', which included, among others, five articles authored by seven Waikato Department of Management Communication public relations researchers. Munshi, along with Lee Edwards from Leeds University, then edited a special issue of *Journal of Public Relations Research* on race in public relations (Munshi & Edwards, 2011).

The editorship roles performed by New Zealand researchers have supported the ongoing evolution of the public relations discipline and also reflect the leadership that scholars working in this country have contributed to that discipline. That leadership is further evidenced in recent international book publications. Perhaps the most significant in terms of international reception was McKie and Munshi's (2007) *Reconfiguring public relations: Ecology, equity, and enterprise*. Described by Coombs (2008, p. 200) as "one of the most thought provoking public relations pieces I have read in a very long time", the book brought together many of McKie and Munshi's calls for greater diversity in public relations research, and for postcolonial and environmental and activist perspectives to be emphasised over managerialist and organisation-centric needs. It won the US National Communication Association (NCA) 2007 Public Relations Division Award for the Outstanding Book of the Year. In the same year Roper won the NCA Edited Book of the Year Award for her co-edited *Communication and corporate social responsibility: Perspectives and arguments* (May, Cheney & Roper, 2007). In 2009 New Zealand was also able to claim part 'ownership' of Krishnamurthy Sriramesh's *The handbook of global public relations: Theory, research, and practice* which he co-edited with Dejan Vercic (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009). In 2008 Sriramesh had been appointed Professor of Public Relations at Massey University, a post he remained in until 2012.

Other books published during this period included the textbook *Public relations and communication management: An Aotearoa/New Zealand perspective*, by the Open Polytechnic's Gary Mersham and AUT's Petra Theunissen and Joseph Peart (Mersham, Theunissen & Peart, 2009). This was the first, and a much-needed, textbook focusing on the practice of public relations in New Zealand. Weaver co-edited *Public relations in global contexts: Multi-paradigmatic perspectives* (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011) which contributed to the ongoing internationalisation of debates around public relations research and practice, and Toledano and McKie (2013) authored *Public relations and nation building: Influencing Israel*. Also of importance at this time was the 2012 NCA Public Relations Division Article of the Year Award made to Shiv Ganesh, a member of Waikato's Department of Management Communication until 2013 when he moved to Massey University, for his co-authored *Communication Theory* publication 'Dialogue, activism and democratic social change' (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012).

Mind the gap

That New Zealand-based scholars have played a lead role in bringing alternative perspectives and paradigms to the public relations disciplinary table is undeniable. Surprisingly and disappointingly, however, little has been written about public relations from a Māori perspective, about public relations campaigns targeted at Māori, or produced by Māori. Comrie and Kupa (1998/9) did make a foray into this area in their *Communicating with Māori: Can public relations become bicultural?* in *Public Relations Quarterly*. This was not a theoretical piece, but one intended to "identify a number of key factors to be considered when dealing with Māori publics" (p. 43). It advised on the importance of face-to-face communication, the use of Māori media in message communication, the involvement of Māori in the communication

and design of campaigns, and an appreciation of the diversity of Māori publics. While certainly offering important advice, Comrie and Kupa did not address some of the very pressing concerns about how public relations might be considered to have supported, and continue to support the ongoing colonisation of New Zealand, first by the British, and later by the ever-tightening grip of market capitalism. Graeme Sterne's (2011) doctoral research did make some tentative steps in this direction through the interviewing of a small sample of Māori and Pacific media representatives about their perceptions of public relations in New Zealand. He found mostly negative perceptions of public relations practice and that practitioners were viewed as lacking understanding of Māori people, culture, and protocols, and failing to represent Māori perspectives. Sterne, whose publications provide valuable insights into media and business perceptions of the public relations in New Zealand (2008a; 2008b; 2010) provides guidance on the protocols for conducting public relations in Māori contexts (2012). Based at Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) he has also devoted himself to creating opportunities for Pacific Island and Māori students to engage with public relations education and training.

Even critical research has not succeeded in bringing to the public relations table discussions of Māori. This may be partly due to the lack of Māori public relations scholars in New Zealand. Indeed Massey PhD graduate Tyron Rakeiora Love (Te Āti Awa) who was at Murdoch University in Australia, but who returned to New Zealand and the University of Canterbury in 2013, could be said to have become the first, and currently only, Māori public relations scholar when he shifted his doctoral focus from promotional discourses in corporate philanthropy (e.g. Love, 2008) to work from within a public relations theory paradigm. Tilley and Love (2005; 2010) and Weaver (2011) have explored how kaupapa Māori protocols could very usefully inform an ethics of public relations practice more widely. However, there remains an all-too-glaring gap in writing about Māori and public relations in

New Zealand, one which we as scholars have some responsibility to help fill.

Concluding remarks

If there is one overarching concern characterising the contribution that New Zealand has made to public relations research it is the dogged insistence that public relations must be theorised as a sociocultural activity, not primarily as an organisational or management one. Researchers in this country have all worked to place 'publics' at the heart of public relations scholarship, rather than privileging management and/or organisational needs. However, there are some ironies in how these researchers have operated. As any reader of the genealogical narrative presented here may have surmised, there has been minimal cross-institutional collaborative support in the development of public relations scholarship in this country. This is partly a reflection of the highly competitive and commercial nature of the New Zealand tertiary education, which is primarily funded through student enrolment fees. This encourages institutions to vie for students and discourages supporting and promoting the success of other competing institutions and their researchers. Additionally, the PBRF system, which ranks individual researchers, rewards those who collaborate with scholars from overseas over and above local collaborations. This may explain why researchers from the three universities with the largest public relations programmes (AUT, Massey and Waikato) have barely collaborated. Yet philosophical differences of approach and perspective - Waikato with its critical sociocultural theory focus, Massey and AUT, and more recently MIT, with their emphasis on 'best practice' and professional ethics - also play some part in this lack of a national dialogue. The lack of knowledge about scholarship coming out of other institutions, and to an extent the related lack of respect for different models of investigation and theorising, has certainly impeded the development of potentially constructive conversations. Whether these

institutional silos can be broken down in the future as a newer generation of researchers enter the discipline in this country remains to be seen. In the meantime, as a nation, we can take considerable pride in what public relations researchers based here have achieved in taking new perspectives and paradigms to the international public relations disciplinary table, and in extending the range of ways in which public relations is investigated, theorised, and debated.

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