
Editorial: *PRism* Issue 3. Research and the peer review process.

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This issue reflects nicely the link between practice and theory that PRism has always aimed to facilitate, and proves that the future of public relations scholarship is bright indeed.

Twenty-one full-length articles on relevant public relations topics, from authors in six countries, were submitted for refereeing for this issue of *PRism*. This is a great indicator of the volume of public relations research in progress around the globe and the continued healthy growth of our body of knowledge. That only six articles (30%) survived right through the refereeing process reflects, I suspect, less that referees were harsh (they weren't) or that quality was low (it wasn't), and more that academics are increasingly under pressure from all sides.

Because, if truth be told, only two of the twenty-one were rejected outright. The others all fell victim to what I can only describe as increasing levels of 'author fatigue', where authors either felt unable to resubmit given the changes required, or resubmitted without really giving attention to making the requested changes, and were therefore disappointed at the second viewing.

Even since the first issue of *PRism* two years ago, I've seen levels of this fatigue-related article attrition rise, and it's not a good thing for either journals or authors. I suspect it is related to the increasing funding squeeze and pressure on academics to perform, perform, perform. Ironically, if such a squeeze is leading authors to seek easier routes for publication when they encounter referees who challenge them, or to abandon work in progress rather than develop it to meet the quality assurance feedback of their peers, the funding squeeze and performance pressures may be having the opposite effect to desired increases in quality research.

There are, however, some simple suggestions for authors which can make the revising process

easier and more likely to lead to success. Undeniably, making changes to work you have already sweated over can seem daunting, and receiving requests for change (even couched in the most positive language) can seem off-putting, but it doesn't have to be so.

I've been editing refereed publications continuously now since 1999, so I've seen several hundred referee reports (positive and not-so-positive), and overseen some 90 or more articles on their journey to successful refereed publication. Most referee reports I've seen, including feedback on my own work, were constructive, encouraging, and insightful. Of course referees are human, though, and occasionally they miss the point of an article. Often, however, this is because the point that the author knew inside and out wasn't clear in the writing, and in those cases some simple restructuring can work wonders. To be blunt, a lot of publishing success depends upon authors' attitudes to the process. They need to be willing either to embrace referees' visions for their work, which often involves putting ego aside, or put more work into enabling referees to engage with their (authorial) vision, by making the argument clearer and more coherent. An article by Murnighan (1996) provides some very useful insights into this from both editors' and authors' perspectives, and is worth reading.

Based on my six years' experience editing refereed journals, here are three simple things I would suggest to authors faced with a rewrite:

1. Make a list of the points referees have made and respond to them systematically, step-by-step.
2. Keep a record of how you have responded to each point, and supply this information in a cover letter (a table or bulleted list is good) when you resubmit the article. (I instruct all authors to do this, but many don't

bother. For those who do, I can confirm from six years' observation that it *definitely* makes a difference to how referees view articles upon resubmission.)

3. If you don't agree with some referees' suggestions, don't stress, and don't email the editor to complain. It's actually OK to disagree. If you intend not to follow a refereeing suggestion, however, it is necessary to make a plausible argument to support your position. Put this in your covering letter. Don't assume that just because you have chosen to ignore a suggestion, the referee will be able to intuit your reasons for doing so. Referees will, however, often be persuaded by a rational and plausible explanation as to why you disagree with one or more of their requirements.

To these points about rewriting, I would add two cardinal rules for all authors:

1. Always read and follow the submission guidelines. Sure, referees assess content more than form, but you are still unlikely to impress in a general sense with sloppiness such as leaving your name on an article or using a different referencing system.
2. Check, recheck, and triple check your referencing. Many referees start their assessment of an article with the references, because care and attention to detail in that area almost invariably reflects the care and attention with which the overall research has been designed and executed. Referencing may be time-consuming, but it is easy to get right: so make the effort.

Every article ever published in *PRism* has required at least some minor changes. How many of the unsuccessful authors didn't follow these simple steps even though advised to? Most of them. How many of the successful authors followed all these steps? Almost all of them.

Refereeing is an imperfect process. We know that. But it's also the best process we have at present for putting safeguards in place against poor quality or misconceived work. *PRism's* referees do an amazing job. I know this: I see some of the things they find that need correcting to save authors (and the journal) from embarrassment, I read their efforts to couch these findings as positively as possible, and I am always impressed with their levels of tact and encouragement. I think it is appropriate when authors thank referees for their time and input as one author has done this issue in a footnote. Such acknowledgement recognises that refereeing is a wholly voluntary, collegial, scholarly-community-oriented activity.

I also see, increasingly, how many submitted articles don't spell check or reference check before submission. This also amazes me. A warning to authors: in my increasingly cranky old age, and given the increasing number of submissions to choose from, I am likely to start rejecting outright for APA style violations!

Rising above it all, however, come some absolute gems of articles with conscientious, responsive, and responsible authors writing on topics that go to the heart of our pursuit of public relations as ethical, strategic communication. It's this that gives me hope for the future of public relations scholarship. I am also proud that *PRism* can bring such articles to you in an online, freely accessible format that encourages wider readership.

The articles in this issue are arranged alphabetically, partly because I wanted to avoid any kind of hierarchical suggestion that any one was 'better' than others (having latterly discovered that some people think being 'first' on the table of contents in a journal equates to winning a gold medal!), and partly because their diversity was such that no clear thematic organisation emerged. I like the resulting juxtaposition of different approaches, as *PRism* was always intended to be diverse and interdisciplinary in its scope. Purely scholarly, theoretically-oriented articles are intermingled with more practical pieces with direct relevance for industry. New writers sit side-by-side with experienced and widely-published scholars.

Thus first we have Brigitta Brunner's examination of diversity issues for university students, which significantly advances application and understanding of relationship theory in public relations. Then we have Karey Harrison and Chris Galloway's important piece on ethics. Next is Lucy Mart and Nigel Jackson's inquiry into whether the size of a public relations consultancy affects how clients perceive its operations and strengths: it does. This is followed by Tamara Wandel's identification of violence in children's movies as a significant issue for the film industry, and one which has yet to be engaged with from an issues management perspective. Tom Watson's article on the language of public relations evaluation raises a crucial issue for practitioners, who often seem quick to embrace 'buzzwords' from other disciplines without fully comprehending their connotations. In questioning terminology, I think Tom's work performs one of the key roles of the academic critic, that is to question and explore things that might otherwise be adopted unquestioningly and taken for granted. So far in its history, *PRism* has debunked celebrity CEOs, expensive branded fonts, and now business jargon. Good stuff! Keep them coming!

Last but not least, Robert Whitbred examines the role of mission statements in organisations, revealing that they are more complex than simple understandings might suggest. All of these are important contributions to public relations scholarship, and I am proud that *PRism* can bring them to you online, in a freely accessible and international forum.

We also have four provocative commentary articles this issue: some much needed comment on peer reviewing from Jane Johnston, a pilot study of press release efficacy from Nick Linardopoulos, a look at gender in public relations from Greg Smith, and a rant about 'public relations' as the much-maligned name of our profession from yours truly. (I had to get it off my chest – and if you too want to rant about something to do with our industry, commentary pieces are always welcome on any topic!)

There are so many wonderful book reviews that I won't list them all (some great new titles in there – check out James Hollings' review of *Release the Hounds* and Kate Fitch's comments on *Talespin*, both of which sound like really entertaining reads).

And now to news of future issues. Firstly, we will be bringing you in August a special issue on social marketing, with refereed and non-refereed papers from the Social Marketing Down Under conference. Secondly, for next year, I am delighted to be able to announce that a special issue on visual communication will be edited by guest editor Annick Janson. Annick has some truly exciting plans for the visual communication issue to fully utilise its online potential, so if you've always wanted to not only write *about* visual communication but also use multimedia and visual forms to *display and present* your research, please make contact with Annick (her contact details are available via the Editorial Board page).

Last but not least, I want to thank the editorial and production team at Massey for their efforts this year. It has been a busy time: even just a few additional articles seem to increase the workload exponentially. The issue would never have been completed without the sterling efforts of Susan Fountaine in particular, who is a writer, editor, and proof-reader extraordinaire, along with Chloe Barnes and Beth Houston. David Wallace is, as always and without any exaggeration, an unparalleled IT genius. I have never known a website to be so trouble-free and so cheerfully and efficiently managed.

Thank you to all the *PRism* referees (all 50 of you now!) who gave so generously of your valuable time to support others' research and the research environment in general. Particularly in these stressful times, your efforts are commendable.

Until next issue, kia ora! Enjoy your reading!
Elspeth

Further reading:

Murnighan, J. K. (1996). Revising and resubmitting: Author emotions, editor roles, and the value of dialogue. In P. J. Frost & S. Taylor (Eds.), *Rhythms of academic life* (pp. 135-142). Thousand Oaks: Sage.