

## → Conference Review: BledCom 2005



Lake Bled

Report by [Dr Tom Watson](http://www.instituteforpr.com/) is updating its dictionary of public relations research terms and would welcome comments and contributions. Also, it seeks contributions to its bibliography of measurement and evaluation literature. The contact is Frank Ovaitt on [iprceo@jou.ufl.edu](mailto:iprceo@jou.ufl.edu) (<http://www.ipr.org.uk/>), of which she was 2004 President. Essentially, CIPR argues that the value of the practice (of public relations) and its potential strategic contribution is clear and that available measures are sufficient to measure and evaluate public relations. CIPR has published the policy statement on its web site, along with a bibliography.

The state of public relations measurement and evaluation discussion by the Grunigs and Jon White was the highlight of the conference with a general theme that research and publications on evaluation had to move on. Whites metaphor of a car stuck in mud with its wheels spinning summarised this and he claimed that the literature is repetitious. All three speakers argued that public relations is difficult to measure because of the social complexity in which it operates. For practitioners to endlessly attempt to isolate public relations activity from its context in order to determine singular effectiveness was wrong.

Larissa Grunig posited that public relations is concerned with ill-structured problems and should be approached by qualitative research. Jon White said that successful practitioners are those who can handle complexity. Jim Grunig said the greatest problem in public relations is not the lack of measurement; it is the lack of conceptualisation and that too often evaluation was undertaken at inappropriate levels. He outlined four levels of analysis ? program, functional, organisational and societal. To illustrate inadequate conceptualisation, he argued that Return on Investment (a term that he had tightly-defined support for) should be addressed at Organisational or Societal level but is usually handled at Program level.

All three speakers made points that public relations should be focused on relationships. This was summarised by Jim Grunig as, the process of public relations is about the cultivation of relationships with publics and that reputation is explained by relationships. Jon White, who disagreed with Jim Grunig on the use of military language because CEOs like it, said that more developed case studies (not award entries) were needed so that practitioners could understand the role of communication programs and strategies within management. They would assist managers understand the role of public relations as being integral to their plans and operations. The case studies, White said, would be used to establish the value created by public relations and public affairs activities.

Lawrence Erlbaum Associates (LEA) will publish conference papers in early 2006. BledCom 2006 will be held from July 7-8 next year. Its theme is Societal Coordination, Public Trust and Organisational Legitimation. The call for papers will be issued shortly via the BledCom website, at <http://www.bledcom.com>.