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## CONFERENCE REPORT: Ninth International Public Relations Research Conference, Miami, Florida: Pool, people – and PR

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It's early evening and the setting is the surrounds of a hotel swimming pool in Miami. Clumps of people are dotted about, engaged in animated conversation – drink in hand, or, perhaps, grazing on light snacks. It could be a scene from anywhere, with this difference: *everyone* is involved in public relations research. At the Ninth International Public Relations Research Conference, held under the auspices of the Florida-based Institute for Public Relations, I met people from as far away geographically as South Africa and Turkey. There was an Italian PhD student teaching at a university in Finland – and a congenial couple from Denmark who teach public relations at a business school there.

It's perhaps not quite *kosher* (there was, by the way, a Jewish professor from Yeshiva University, New York) to begin a conference report by talking about the people present in this way. In my experience, however, it was the personal interaction, one-on-one or in small groups, that meant as much and at times more than the conference presentations themselves, interesting as they were. The presentation format was new to me. There was a strict regime: no Powerpoint (relief!) or in fact, audiovisual aids of any kind. You present in a room with five tables. Fifteen minutes is allotted to each presentation. You start at a table and move around the room as you choose.

It can be a little intimidating. When I presented, three of the field's big names in scholarly publishing were all present, on the other side of the table – all ears. I took a deep breath and ploughed ahead, as colleagues were doing all around me. While the level of ambient noise grew disconcerting at times, the format certainly made for close-in engagement. It is

attractive enough to the academic audience that next year, the organizer, the indefatigable Don Stacks of the University of Miami, is contemplating booking out the entire hotel for the event.

What did we learn? It's not easy to discern clear trends among a plethora of papers, a raft of research – so my comments are necessarily highly selective. Three speakers, including one expatriate Aussie – Elizabeth Dougall, of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill – spoke about lessons on disaster communication from Indonesia. Sadly, that particular case seems likely to produce such lessons for some time to come. They sought to apply the concept of HRO theory (High Reliability Organisations) to analyzing the crisis communication that took place in relation to four terrorist bombings and the devastating tsunami. The authors found that some HRO characteristics were exhibited during each crisis, such as a “tight coupling” between the government and a PR consultancy. Other HRO attributes were not present, such as redundancy: the government did not seek to duplicate any resources, personnel or practices being carried out by its consultancy. As someone with a personal interest in disaster (and risk) communication, I look forward to more research that handles the issues in an innovative way, as Dougall *et al* did.

Not all presentations were focused on a particular case, such as that of a sequence of disasters. Jim van Leuven, of the University of Oregon, discussed the application of the identity theory and stakeholder theory literatures to public relations study, arguing that these literatures could be “possible intellectual second homes for those studying organizational-public relationships”. One of van Leuven's sources is

Ledingham's work emphasizing the relationship management dimension of public relations theorizing and praxis. Jim's view is that the time is right to consider how public relations theory, identity theory and the stakeholder theory and research tradition inform each other.

Other paper topics indicate the breadth of coverage available: Rectification without assuming responsibility; Testing the transgression flowchart with the Vioxx recall; Effectively functioning campaign teams; Weblogs and employee communication; Ethical questions for corporate communication; and the Critical Support Path – an aid to understanding audiences; were only a few of those on offer.

It's impossible to do justice to an event such as this in a short compass. But I found it both exhilarating and enriching. I aim to return – and recommend what will be the Tenth International Public Research Conference next year to others. Keep an eye on [www.instituteforpr.com](http://www.instituteforpr.com) for details in due course.

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