

Forging a New Frontier in Public Relations Research: Introducing the Research Journal of the Institute for Public Relations

Donald K. Wright, Ph.D.
Harold Burson Professor & Chair in Public Relations
College of Communication – Boston University

***Abstract:** This article outlines the major aims and goals of the Research Journal of the Institute for Public Relations, a new, open-access, double-blind, peer reviewed rapid publication. It explains how the RJ-IPR can help the Institute continue to build a bridge between the academy and the practice while exploring what IPR likes to call the science beneath the art of public relations.™ The article also reviews the prestige, strengths and limitations of online, scholarly journals, the role they can play and the impact they can have in a variety of academic disciplines.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This article introduces the *Research Journal of the Institute for Public Relations (RJ-IPR)*, a web-based, rapid publication, open-access, double-blind, peer reviewed journal the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) intends on publishing a minimum of two and a maximum of six times each year. A major purpose of this new publication is to help bridge the public relations research knowledge gap between the academy and the practice.

Although many public relations educators suggest one of the major values of scholarly research is to advance the field's body of knowledge, critics indicate too much of the research currently being published in the public relations scholarly literature is designed more to help educators meet requirements of their employment with various universities. At most universities, decisions ranging all the way from annual raises to promotion and tenure are based in a large part upon a professor's publication record. This often results in research being designed, conducted and published for academic audiences at the expense of practical ones.

IPR has been an enthusiastic supporter of public relations research for nearly sixty years exploring what it likes to refer to as *the science beneath the art of public relations*.™ The Institute founded the nation's first public relations scholarly journal, *Public Relations Review*, in 1975, but reluctantly stopped its role as publisher in 1985. IPR has been publishing significant research about public relations on its website for nearly three decades, has involved public relations scholars in IPR professional development programming since 1992 and has had its headquarters on the campus of a major university with noted public relations degree programs since 1995. IPR has made other major contributions to research, measurement and evaluation over the years including creation of the IPR Measurement Commission, the world's first professional

group to thoroughly explore public relations research from corporate/organizational, agency, research provider and academic/scholarly perspectives.

One of the criticisms public relations practitioners express about scholarly research in traditional printed journals is how long it takes for articles to be published. It's not uncommon for something to appear in print three or four years after it's been written. The rapid publication and online aspects of the *RJ-IPR* will lead to more prompt publication of research while the free and open-access nature of this exciting new publication should dramatically enhance its readership.

The *RJ-IPR* has received dedicated support from the IPR Board of Trustees and the staff of the Institute. This first issue features articles by some of the nations leading public relations scholars on topics of considerable interest to practitioners. They include an article about employee communication by Dr. Bruce Berger, Professor Emeritus, College of Communication, University of Alabama; a summary of research about social media and public relations by Dr. Tina McCorkindale, Associate Professor of Communication, Appalachian State University and Dr. Marcia W. DiStaso, Associate Professor of Public Relations, College of Communications, Pennsylvania State University; an article exploring highlights of research about crisis communication by Dr. W. Timothy Coombs, Professor, Nicholson School of Communication, University of Central Florida; and, an overview of media relations research by Dr. Dustin W. Supa, Assistant Professor of Public Relations, College of Communication, Boston University.

Preface

For the past 18 years, educators and practitioners interested in public relations research have gathered to exchange ideas at the International Public Relations Research Conference (IPRRC) now held each March at the University of Miami. Although there are a number of other annual academic conferences where public relations scholars present research papers, IPRRC consistently attracts more practitioners who are interested in research, measurement and evaluation.

About a decade ago, in an attempt to make this conference more attractive to these practitioners, IPRRC organizers asked authors of the nearly 90 research papers scheduled for presentation to write news releases summarizing their work. When about one-third of the authors were unable to do this and an equal number of them submitted releases that would have received failing grades in most of the nation's public relations methods classes, organizers scrapped the news release idea.

Unfortunately, the problem some IPRRC authors faced with this news release assignment continues to exist today in many aspects of public relations education. Although most of the public relations scholarly research being conducted is methodologically sound and much of it contributes significantly to the ever-growing public relations body of knowledge, the unfortunate reality is news about far too many of these research studies never reach those who practice public relations. And, if it does,

practitioners rarely find the research valuable because (a) too many of these studies focus upon topics practitioners rarely care about and (b) they're often written for academic audiences and frequently are difficult for practitioners to understand. Additionally, much of this research doesn't get published until months (and even years) after it has been conducted which lightens much of the initial practitioner interest in these studies.

Introduction

The purpose of this article – and the entire first issue of this online publication – is to introduce the *Research Journal of the Institute for Public Relations (RJ-IPR)*. Designed as a web-based, rapid publication, open-access, double-blind, peer reviewed journal, the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) initially plans to “publish” a minimum of two and a maximum of six *RJ-IPR* issues per year, it is the intention of the *RJ-IPR* editors, its Editorial Review Board and the IPR Board of Trustees that this new publication will help bridge the research knowledge gap between public relations educators and practitioners.

While a major role of the more traditional academic journals is to concentrate upon theory and advancing a scholarly body of knowledge, *RJ-IPR* will focus mainly on publishing research that matters to the practice. This does not imply that the *RJ-IPR* will be a trade magazine. With the combination of the IPR's distinguished Board of Trustees, members of the IPR Measurement Commission and a newly-appointed Editorial Review Board consisting of some of the world's most noted public relations scholars, *RJ-IPR* has put in place a system designed to ensure it's articles satisfy not only a thorough and rigorous, double-blind, peer-review process but also are designed to enhance the knowledge needs of public relations practitioners.

Academic Expectations

Although many public relations educators indicate that the major value of scholarly research is to advance the body of knowledge, critics suggest too much of the research currently being published in public relations academic journals is designed more to help educators meet requirements of their employment with various universities. Most of the nation's public relations educators are expected to publish research in “quality” academic journals. At most universities, decisions ranging all the way from annual raises to promotion and tenure are based in a large part upon a professor's publication record.

The key word here is “quality” and it is measured mainly on the basis of how often research articles are cited in other scholarly studies. Quality also is measured by the reputation a journal has, whether or not articles published in it are selected via a double-blind, peer review selection process, the perceived quality of its editorial review board among other factors.

Role of the Institute for Public Relations

The Institute for Public Relations has been interested in public relations scholarship since it was founded in 1955 as the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education. IPR has worked enthusiastically with considerable vigor to help provide a bridge between the academy and the practice all the while exploring what it likes to refer to as *the science beneath the art of public relations*.™ The IPR's Pathfinder Award remains one of the world's most coveted and prestigious prizes available for public relations research.

This introduction of *RJ-IPR* is not the Institute's first venture into publishing an academic journal. IPR founded *Public Relations Review* in 1975 and reluctantly stopped serving as that journal's publisher in 1985. IPR also has published a significant amount of information about public relations research for the past three decades. IPR also has involved public relations educators in its professional development programming since 1992 and has had its headquarters at a major university with a noted public relations degree program since 1995.

Other Scholarly Journals in Public Relations

Public Relations Review became the nation's first refereed, scholarly publication when it was founded by IPR in 1975. Now the property of publishing conglomerate Elsevier, since its inception the *Review* has been edited by Ray E. Hiebert a professor emeritus and founding dean of the College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. Thanks to dedicated perseverance by Professor Hiebert, *Public Relations Review* continues to be considered one of the world's most respected scholarly publications in public relations.

The Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication introduced the *Journal of Public Relations Research* in 1989 mainly as the result of the efforts of James E. Grunig and Larissa Grunig, two of the world's most prolific authors of public relations scholarship. Now retired from the University of Maryland, the Grunig's have made phenomenal contributions to public relations research and education. This publication began as a public relations research annual and after three years evolved into *JPRR*. It's now published by Taylor & Francis but continues to have close connections with the PRD of AEJMC. Although the *JPRR* has had several different editors since its inception more than two decades ago, the Grunig's continue to have considerable influence in what many consider to be the nation's leading academic publication in public relations.

The Public Relations Society of America introduced *Public Relations Journal* as an online, double-blind, peer reviewed, juried academic publication in 2007. Given the growth and development of public relations education during the 1990s and 2000s, public relations educators embraced the publication opportunities made available by this new arrival on the scene of public relations scholarship.

In addition to these journals and other U.S. publications in the areas of "communication" and "mass communication," there are a variety of overseas

opportunities for public relations scholarship most notably the *Journal of Communication Management* published by the Emerald Group in Great Britain since 1996.

The Academic Impact Factor

Many universities are now attempting to quantify the perceived value of academic research. These assessments include assigning every scholarly journal an “impact factor” based upon the average number of article citations a journal receives. Journals with higher impact factors are considered to be more important and influential than those with lower ones. In spite of a number of inherent problems with this methodology, especially the assumption that all citations are equal, and considerable debate about the validity of the impact factor, many universities now use it in attempts to gauge the value of a professor’s research. Faculty members frequently are granted or denied promotion and tenure based upon this measure of the impact of their research.

It’s an understatement to suggest the journals designed to have impressive impact factors focus on the theoretical at the expense of the practical. This has added to their criticism not only in public relations and other aspects of communication education but also in other professional schools and colleges. Sam Wineburg (2013), a professor of history and education at Stanford University has criticized the disconnect between the “academic” and real-world” impact factors within professional colleges. Wineburg also has addressed other fallacies of academic scholarship including his belief that very few people actually read theoretical-based articles. He has said, “Unfortunately, the truth is what goes in the pages of (most scholarly research journals) stays within the pages (of these journals).” He also claims, “Confusing (academic) impact factor with real-world impact may enhance our annual reviews, but – in the long term – may lead to our own extinction.”

Supporters of the academic impact factor understandably assume large numbers of people are reading scholarly publications but others suggest this might not be the case (Jones & Cook, 2000). Butler claims half of the printed academic journals in most university libraries are consulted fewer than 50 times annually and says only fifteen percent are viewed more than 200 times a year.

Recent Changes in Academic Publications

One of the biggest criticism public relations practitioners have expressed about scholarly research in traditional printed journals is the length of time it takes for an article to be published. For example, it’s not uncommon for something to appear in print three or four years after it’s been written. Granted some of these journals now have both printed and online versions but the gap between when an article is written and when it’s published continues to be unusually long. In public relations this precipitates a huge disconnect between what academics are researching and information practitioners say they need to know about.

Additionally, many of the large publishing houses that originally thought they could dramatically increase revenues by entering academic publishing are now being burdened by ever increasing publication costs and the decreasing value of many traditional scholarly journals as advertising media (Kiernan, 1998). As Jones and Cook (2000) have pointed out, the specialized nature of academic publishing once led to huge profits because they could charge unusually high subscription fees for scholarly journals. Also, the retail prices publishers could charge for textbooks sometimes were four or five times more than novels. Not too long ago, McCabe (2002) suggested prices charged by some academic publishers fringed on anti-trust activities since profit margins of this nature would not exist in truly competitive markets. This has forced some university libraries to limit the number of journals they subscribe to.

These factors also have led some academic journals to begin charging authors for publishing their scholarly work. Fees for this range between \$1,500 and \$2,000 per article and since few universities have the resources to pay for this publishing, the financial burden often rests with individual faculty members.

Advantages of Online Publishing

As we have pointed out previously (Wright, 2007), these economic realities coupled with advances in technology have stimulated the creation of a good number of academic journals that are “published” online and do not have traditional printed versions. The first such journal was established in Norway nearly twenty-five years ago. Thousands of online journals are published today (McCabe, 2007).

In addition to cost factors, online publishing is popular because contents of web-based, academic journals are available anywhere and anytime beyond the physical space of libraries (Wright, 2007). Most of the highly prestigious online journals have open access to everyone; select articles through a rigorous, double-blind review process; feature esteemed authors and editorial boards; are sponsored by highly regarded professional societies; score high on citation indexes; and are favorably regarded in terms of subjected rankings (Wright, 2007).

Academic publications of this nature make new knowledge available to researchers and practitioners in the shortest possible time; and, provide fast publication schedules while maintaining rigorous, double-blind review processes. They also provide opportunities for readers to make online comments about published articles and permit video and other technologies to be included as part of publications.

Examples of online academic journals can be found today in many academic fields including advertising, anthropology, audiology, biology, broadcasting, chemistry, communication, economics, education, engineering, management, geography, history, journalism, marketing, mass communication, mathematic, nursing, philosophy, physics, political science, psychology, sociology, statistics and zoology.

Moving Forward with the RJ-IPR

When the first editions of the *Journal of Public Relations Research* arrived more than twenty years ago, the hope was that it would complement rather than compete with *Public Relations Review*. Both of those traditional scholarly journals have made huge contributions to the growth and development of the public relations body of knowledge. The intention for the *Research Journal of the Institute for Public Relations* is that it will compliment PRSA's *Public Relations Journal* that has played a significant role in developing public relations research for the past eight years.

The *RJ-IPR* has enthusiastic support from the IPR Board of Trustees and the staff of the Institute. We're also delighted to feature articles by some of the nation's leading public relations scholars in this initial issue. We hope readers will return frequently to the online pages of this new publication and to consider submitting articles to us for publication consideration at journal@instituteforpr.org.

References

- Butler, D. (1999). The writing is on the web for science journals in print. *Nature*, January 21. 195-200.
- Jones, S.L. & Cook, C.B. (2000). Electronic journals. Are they a paradigm shift? *Online Journal of Issues in Nursing*. Accessed at: <http://nursingworld.org/mods/archive/mod210/ceelful.htm>.
- Kiernan, V. (1998). Paying by the article. Libraries test a new model for scholarly journals. *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, August 14, A21-A22.
- Lynch, C.A. (1994). Scholarly communication in the networked environment: Reconsidering economics and organizational missions. *Serials Review*, (20), 3, 23-30.
- McCabe, M.J. (2002). Journal pricing and mergers: A portfolio approach. *The American Economic Review*, (92), 259-262. March.
- McCabe, M.J. (2007). E-mail communication with Donald K. Wright. October 3.
- McPherson, J.M. (2003). A crisis in scholarly publishing. *American Historical Association Perspectives*, October. Accessed at: <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2003/a-crisis-in-scholarly-publishing>
- Sparks, S. (1999). Electronic publishing and nursing research. *Nursing Research*, (48),

50-54.

Sumner, D.E. (2006). The viability and prestige of online journals, *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research*, (9) 2. Accessed at:

http://aejmc magazine.arizona.edu/Journal/Summer2007/Managing_editor.pdf

Wineburg, S. (2013). Choosing real-world impact over impact factor. *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, August 26. Accessed at:

<http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2013/08/26/choosing-real-world-impact-over-impact-factor/>

Wright, D.K. (2007). Reviewing the growth and development of scholarly, online publishing: Forging a new frontier in public relations research. *Public Relations Journal*, (1) 1. Accessed at:

http://www.prsa.org/SearchResults/download/6D-010105/0/Reviewing_the_Growth_and_Development_of_Scholarly