

Can public relations theories
explain public relations
practice:

An analysis of reactive and
strategic issues management
through case study.

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Semi-structured face-to-face/telephone interview questions - journalists.

Attachment

Original research proposal.

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1. Executive Summary

This dissertation answers the question: 'Can public relations theories explain public relations practice: an analysis of reactive and strategic issues management through case study'.

Three case study sites were selected and the primary research method used was semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews with public relations practitioners and journalists. The interviewees' responses were vital in gaining the first person accounts on which the researcher based this investigation.

The conclusion will discuss the limitations of existing theories in relation to explaining public relations practice.

2. Introduction

2.1 Research aim

The aim of this enquiry is to use an analysis of reactive and strategic issues management, through three case study sites, to answer the question: can public relations theories explain public relations practice?

2.2 Case study sites

The sites were selected taking into account what the researcher wanted to find out, in relation to the aim of the research. Three sites were chosen and selected using the following criteria:

- To choose cases which represented a cross-section of the business world
- To choose cases dealing with sensitive information with the potential to deal with difficult information on matters of public concern
- To choose cases that had a well-established in-house public relations department.

The three sites chosen were:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Nuclear Electric Limited | - as it represents a newly privatised company and addresses issues of public safety |
| Eurostar | - as it is dependent upon a monopoly provider - Eurotunnel |
| Shell Chemicals UK | - as this is a multinational organisation in the midst of re-structuring and addressing issues management as a specific function. |

2.3 Synopsis of the methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted in order to explore the case study sites and understand the perceptions of those being interviewed towards issues

management. The information taken from semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews was the basis of the researcher's primary data. The data was used to interpret the practice of public relations practitioners, and in trying to interpret their practice the researcher drew upon public relations, communications and management theories.

The researcher drew upon journalists' accounts of dealing with public relations professionals, to discover how journalists interpret information which they have been given. These accounts also addressed how the media's role as potential mediator of information helps to answer the question: can public relations theories explain public relations practice?

2.4 Reasons for research

The researcher decided to investigate this subject for her dissertation because there appeared to be limited research into the nature of public relations theory by drawing upon the experiences of existing public relations professionals. The researcher wanted to discover whether it was possible to create an explanation of how public relations practitioners do what they do.

While on placement at Nuclear Electric Limited in 1996-1997 the researcher was left to run the northern press office for six months. During this time she was continuously evaluating how she dealt with problems and managed issues of sensitivity. The researcher was faced with the following questions about her practice:

- "Why did I decide to manage that situation in that way?"
- How could I be sure that my judgement and decision was the right decision?
- Should I trust my personal experience and instinct in dealing with this issue?
- How do I explain my public relations practice in the process of trying to improve it?"

These questions were the catalyst for undertaking this piece of research.

The dissertation requirements stated that this piece of research needed to be written in the third person. Therefore, it was not possible to undertake a research project of the nature, “How do I practise public relations when dealing with issues management and does public relations theory explain public relations practice?” It was therefore necessary to draw upon other practitioners’ experiences and investigate how these individuals practised public relations. The researcher will return to the elimination of the first person later.

2.5 Terms of reference

The basis of this investigation draws upon several arguments connected with the conflict between reactive and strategic public relations. The following terms of reference are the grounding on which this enquiry is based:

- 2.5.1 To identify the different kinds of strategic and reactive issues in the case study sites.
- 2.5.2 To investigate the methods used to plan and design strategic issues management programmes.
- 2.5.3 To investigate strategic and reactive issues management theory.
- 2.5.4 To investigate the limitations of existing public relations theory in relation to explaining public relations practice in the case study sites.

2.6 Organisation of the dissertation

Leading on from the introduction, chapter three introduces the reader to the subject of issues management and illustrates the researcher’s ability to undertake a literature review. Chapter four outlines the different types of theories that influence public relations and public relations practice is explained in chapter five. Chapter six discusses the methodology behind the researcher’s approach to investigating her research question. The findings and analysis of data are discussed in chapter seven leading onto the researcher’s conclusions and recommendations in chapter eight.

3. What is Issues Management?

‘Issues management’ is a relatively new concept to the public relations industry. Practitioners have been reacting to issues for years but it was not until the early 1970s that companies started to adopt the term and incorporate the science of managing issues into their business.

Increasingly issues management is being recognised as an integral part of the public relations role in relation to how companies respond to problems as and when they arise or have a plan to implement. Industries are recognising that:

‘...an issue ignored is a crisis ensured’. Henry Kissinger

(Regester and Larkin 1997:63)

There is a close relationship between crisis and issues management and what might be an issue for one company could certainly be a crisis for another.

Hainsworth (1990) defined an issue as: ‘a point of conflict between an organisation and one or more of its publics’.

As Gregory (1996:36-37) explains issues generally fall into a number of categories:

‘Structural. The major long-term trends in society, such as an ageing population, technological developments, things over which the individual organisation will have very little control.

External. Largely contextual issues such as environmental concerns, community concerns, political imperatives.

Crises. Normally short-term and arising from unforeseen events, for example a factory disaster, war, product recalls.

Internal. Long or short-term issues that are facing the company from within, for example succession policy and industrial relations.

Current affairs. Those things that are of immediate public interest and which often are the subject of intense media coverage at the time, for example, dangerous dogs' legalisation following a series of dog attacks reported in the media.

Potential. Those issues that have not yet emerged. It might seem rather odd to list this but it is very much the case that some issues do appear to arise from nowhere, except that the careful practitioner will have an intelligence system at their disposal that can give early warning of potential issues that are likely to become real. Content analysis of the media can often give an indicator.'

This investigation focuses on all of the above categories except for 'crises'. This is because the researcher was interested in the process of issues management, the measures organisations put in place to prevent the issue becoming a crisis.

Nicholas (PR Week 1996:19) refers to, 'the discipline of issues management'. The word discipline indicates that there is theoretical knowledge related to the discipline, however, this relates to management theory. Tucker and Broom (1993) support this opinion by relating issues management to the management process: 'Issues management is the management process whose goal is to help preserve markets, reduce risk, create opportunities and manage image (corporate reputation) as an organisational asset for the benefit of both an organisation and its primary shareholders.'

Kitchen (1997:33) refers to Chase (1977:25-6) who explained issues management as: 'the process of identifying issues, analysing those issues, setting priorities, selecting programme strategy options, implementing a programme of action and communication, and evaluating effectiveness.'

This systematic approach to issues management appears to be the industry's ideal for dealing with this discipline. The internal and external environments of organisations need to be monitored and analysed in order to keep companies informed of potential impact on their business. Gregory (1996:62) explains this need by stating: 'Thus issues analysis works in both directions: detecting those external factors, political, social or technological that require the company to change; and identifying those areas where it might have an input into the public debate and influence the outcome.'

This process can be illustrated in the model below:



(Gregory 1996:62)

Regester and Larkin (1997:42) refer to Chase and Jones's description of an issue as 'an unsettled matter which is ready for decision'.

Regester and Larkin (1997:42) identify an issue as 'a gap between corporate practice and stakeholder expectations'. This definition is described further by Kitchen (1997:34) who puts it into the context of two case studies:

'Reactive public relations occurred in the case of Rely brand tampons, and Firestone 500 tyres (Gatewood and Carroll:1981). When Rely brand tampons were found to have a possible link with toxic shock syndrome, Procter and Gamble acted quickly to remove the brand from retailer shelves, and advertising and public relations campaigns were utilised to warn and protect consumers. Johnson and Johnson only agreed to withdraw its Firestone 500 tyres after heavy pressure from the USA National Highway Traffic Safety Commission and others and this after 41 deaths and 65 injuries which may have been related to tyre defects in the brand. The result was a tarnished image and a \$135m product recall cost.'

The examples quoted supply ample evidence for the management of issues, rather than the firefighting-type reactions. What the Procter and Gamble and Johnson and Johnson examples illustrate is that reactive PR to a particular issue is the result of forethought, planning and policy thought out in advance.'

The example of Procter and Gamble, although reactive in nature, indicates that its success was based on planning and 'forethought' to a potential situation of this nature.

There is still confusion over the term 'issues management' as Nicholas (1996:19) wrote: 'the lines between what constitutes issues and crisis management remain blurred'. She concluded that; '...of the companies questioned, two-thirds were familiar with the term issues management but, of these, 40 per cent still considered the practice to be confined to commercial issues as opposed to political, social and environmental concerns.'

Despite different definitions and explanations for the term of issues management, organisations are recognising its importance and the essential role which this function plays in today's business world. If organisations ignore their environments and continue to function without taking notice of public opinion their business could suffer. This could be through: corporate image; share price; reduced confidence of its stakeholders, negative coverage from the media and increase pressure from activist groups.

The Body Shop International plc has recognised the importance of issues management and although it has traded very successfully for 15 years, it has taken a proactive public relations stance. In dealing with ethically sound business and products; it is addressing its working environment. This company has started to participate in 'ethical auditing' and as Anita Roddick founder and chief executive of the company stated: 'Ethical auditing is not about corporate public relations. It is about recognising that business increasingly impacts on the lives and environment of millions of our fellow citizens. For The Body

Shop, auditing is plain common sense. It also delivers positive commercial benefits.' (The Independent 16th May, 1997 pp8)

This internationally renowned company has realised that it is accountable to its 'environment' and recognises the 'positive commercial benefits' for the company to trade in an ethical way. It is acknowledging the importance of the company's environment and the consequences to its business if these factors are not monitored.

4. Public Relations, Communications and Management Theories

Having considered issues management, this chapter illustrates how the public relations industry has drawn upon theories from other disciplines, to explain its own practice. It also considers how different types of theory have an influence on the discipline of public relations.

4.1 What is theory?

‘A theory is a set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena.’ (Botan and Hazelton (1989) use Kerlinger 1973:9 explanation of theory).

Botan & Hazelton (1989:283) suggests that a theory should possess a number of characteristics, ‘the most important of which is its predictive ability’.

Although the researcher supports these definitions of theory and is not dismissing the propositional form of these explanations, Schon (1983) points out that: ‘..when someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case.’ This statement is the approach which the researcher believes applies to the development of theory relating to the practice of the public relations practitioner.

Schon (1983) also believes that: ‘Theories are theories regardless of their origin: there are practical, common-sense theories as well as academic or scientific theories. A theory is not necessarily accepted, good, or true; it is only a set of interconnected propositions that have the same referent - the subject of the theory.’

Argyris and Schon (1975) believe that, 'Theories are vehicles for explanation, prediction, explanatory theory explains events by setting forth propositions from which these events may be inferred, a predictive theory sets forth propositions from which inferences about future events may be made, and a theory of control describes the conditions under which events of certain kind may be made to occur. In each case, the theory has an 'if...then....' form'. These theories relate to the management element needed in public relations.

4.2 Public relations theories

Public relations theory should be able to explain the actions of public relations practitioners and develop an explanation for how they respond to issues. However, the public relations industry is experiencing the same problem which education faced 20-years-ago. There is not enough information about public relations theory to produce adequate explanations about public relations practice. Without hard theoretical grounding the public relations industry is not viewed as having a strong knowledge base and professionalism. As McElreath (1993:297) claims, 'the body of knowledge in public relations is not static' and that 'there are many more questions than answers.'

Botan (1989) in Botan and Hazleton (1989:109) states that, '...our current understanding of public relations must be accepted as the foundation on which to build.'

Crable and Vibbert (1986), Nager and Allen (1984) and Grunig and Hunt (1984) have all written about public relations theory. Additionally, public relations practitioners are encouraged to draw upon theories used from management, communications, psychology, sociology, and economics when giving explanations of how they conduct their occupation. This dissertation is concerned with whether these disciplines can produce a valid explanation in terms of a discipline of public relations.

Crable and Vibbert (1986) established 'task levels' which can be used to develop public relations programmes and which consist of 'performance,

analysis and identification as distinct levels tied closely to human development' (Botan & Hazelton 1989:162). These criteria are certainly useful for evaluation and describing tasks which need to be performed but they do not explain how the practitioner would achieve these activities.

Nager and Allen (1984) relate the public relations discipline to 'management by objective' (Botan & Hazleton 1989:162) which is goal-orientated and involves step-by-step guidelines to achieve the end result. Again, this approach would be beneficial to individuals new to the public relations field but if an event occurred to disrupt the process they might be lost and the activity may not be completed.

Grunig and Hunt (1984:22) refer to persuasion theory as being the prime technique for implementing public relations activities. They refer to four models of public relations theory which can be directly related to the means of accomplishing public relations activities. These models trace the development of public relations and draw a distinction between public relations functions:

Press agency/publicity -	public relations has a propaganda function.
Public information -	the intention is for public relations to disseminate information, not necessarily with persuasive intention.
Two-way asymmetric - knowledge public to	public relations professionals use their of social science theory to persuade the adopt the organisation's point of view.
Two-way symmetric -	the public relations' role is to gain a mutual understanding between organisations and their publics.

4.2.1 Limitations of public relations theories

Botan & Hazelton (1989:100) explain the limitations of existing public relations theory in relation to practice: 'Public relations is concerned with using communication to exchange meanings between organisations and their publics. Public relations is, therefore, an instance of applied communication that can be studied using theoretic and research tools from the communication discipline.' It is suggested that the communications theories below can be useful explanations of public relations. These again draw upon another discipline and not the field of public relations theory, as a discipline is its own right. Communications theory is also drawn upon to explain public relations practice.

4.3 Communications theory

Windahl and Signitzer (1997:58) use Rodgers' (1987:79) definition of communication as, 'a process in which participants create and share information with one another to reach a mutual understanding'. This description is derived from the convergence model and links to the industry definition.

Public relations practice is described by the Institute of Public Relations in Jefkins (1993:10) as, 'the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain good-will and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.'

This definition is extremely important as it states that public relations is a two-way process. However, Haywood (1993:4) states that, 'Effective public relations is much more than communications: it should be more fundamental to the organisation. Public relations should begin before the decision-making stage - when attitudes towards the issues are being developed by management and policies are being formed.'

McQuail (1994:6) identifies four different levels of theory:

Social scientific: which is derived from work done according to scientific rules and methods, and characterised by reliance on abstract concepts. Systematic, observation; empirical.

Normative: which tells us how communication should be formed and function in certain cases, based on values and ideology. This is a contextual approach and is prescriptive.

Working: which instructs the practitioner on how to do communication planning to achieve a communication goal according to communication theory often formalised by practitioners themselves.

Common sense: which originates in our own experience and guides us through every day life.

Public relations theory and the function of issues management can also be drawn from management theories.

4.4 Management theory

Mullins (1993:337) explains contingency theory, one aspect of management theory, as, 'the contingency approach takes the view that there is no one best universal structure. There are a large number of variables, or situational factors, which influence organisational design and performance. The contingency approach emphasises the need for flexibility.'

Flexibility is a key element to the public relations function and to the discipline of issues management. The public relations professional needs to gauge his or

her response by evaluating the situation and adopting the appropriate method to deal with the problem.

However, Mullins (1993:353) goes on to explain that, ‘contingency models of organisation(s) fail to give sufficient emphasis to unanticipated consequences of planned change, for example, the effects of the introduction of new technology on the internal working of the organisation or on the social interactions among groups of people engaged in certain activities.’

Despite these limitations of contingency theory it has provided ‘a further insight into our understanding of relationships among factors influencing the structure, management and operations of work organisations.’ (Mullins 1993:354)

Contingency theory can be linked to Heath’s (1997:6) definition of issues management, ‘Issues management is a means for linking the public relations function and the management function of the organisation in ways that foster the organisation’s efforts to be outer directed and to have a participate organisational culture.’

From this study of public relations, communication and management theory there appears to be a gap, that there is not a theory base for building public relations theories from the explanations which public relations practitioners create as they carry out their public relations practice. The researcher’s conclusion is reinforced by Botan (1989) in Botan and Hazleton (1989:109), McElreath (1993:297) and Schon (1983).

Moss and Warnaby (1997:60) discuss Grunig and Repper’s (1993:123) explanation of the ‘environmental void’ which exists ‘in theories of strategic management, but, equally, they recognise the need for public relations scholars to draw more heavily on strategic management theories ‘to fill the void’ in

public relations theories of how public relations can contribute to effective organisations.’

Chaffee (1985:96) explains that, ‘the full of value of strategy cannot be realised in practical terms until theorists expand the construct to reflect the real complexities of organisations.’

These explanations can be connected to the management of issues through the implementation of management theory. This can be seen by Hainsworth (1990) in Regester & Larkin (1997:48) who refers to the ‘cyclical development’ when explaining issues management theory: ‘Issues generally evolve in a predictable manner, originating from trends or events and developing through a sequence of identifiable stages that are not dissimilar to the cyclical development of a product.’

This approach is also reflected by Hainsworth (1990) and Meng (1992) who designed the ‘issues lifecycle’ model which identifies issues as they develop. ‘An issue can fail at any point in the process for any number of reasons, but issues that continue to mature appear to consistently evolve from one stage to the next’ (Regester and Larkin 1997:47). This can be related to Grunig and Hunt’s two-way assymetric model which Regester and Larkin claim together give a comprehensive explanation of the theory behind strategic issues management. What this explanation does not address however, is the way that public relations practitioners actually implement these concepts and ideas in a real situation.

4.4.1 Personal experience

The researcher’s belief that learning from the professional experience of practitioners can help to build public relations theory is supported by Gruing and Hunt (1984:77) who claim that: ‘Personal experiences do provide valuable knowledge, but eventually, we believe, those experiences must be organised into a coherent theory of public relations. That theory then should be tested, in order to determine its ability to solve public relations problems.’

With this analysis of theories which influence public relations, the next chapter will explain the differences between public relations techniques used in public relations practice.

5. Public Relations Practice

This chapter discusses three approaches to public relations practice: reactive, proactive and strategic.

Botan (1989:107) states that, 'Practitioners who put the practice of public relations first are acting appropriately, but they may be able to get double service out of their practice by also using it to make contributions to theory development.'

There are two approaches to public relations practice as outlined by Center & Jackson (1994:13), and by Gregory (1996:60-62). These are reactive and proactive.

5.1 Reactive

This is where the public relations department, 'wait for public criticism, for emergencies or bad publicity before they act. They are usually likened to fire-fighters, who don't get going until there's a fire.' (Center & Jackson 1994:13)

Traverse-Healy (1995) supports this by saying, 'Too many companies tend to have PR programmes of a responsive [reactive] rather than a proactive nature, often without a background plan or policy, with little attempt to frame a strategy, and certainly unrelated to the company's overall business plans and corporate objectives.'

Nicholas (PR Week 1996:19-20) writes about this opinion drawing upon research into issues management, 'It was also widely seen to be a defensive activity 'essentially a reaction to problems rather than a business building process; a form of insurance or damage limitation'.....This whole area is still seen as something to be dealt with on an ad hoc, reactive basis.'

5.2 Proactive

The counter argument from a reactive approach to public relations is a proactive approach. This is where the public relations department takes a more strategic approach: 'This is like fire prevention. Public relations practitioners are constantly looking for potential opportunities and problems. Thus they will be ready to take advantage of opportunities when they arise and to prevent potential problems from flaring up.' (Center & Jackson 1994:13)

Regeister and Larkin (1997:61) discuss issues management as, 'a proactive, anticipatory and planned process designed to influence the development of an issue before it evolves to a stage which requires crisis management.'

Kitchen (1997:33) agrees with Regeister and Larkin's explanation and states that; 'issues management refers to a particular proactive as opposed to reactive strategy.'

Gregory (1996:61) identifies that organisations which are proactive in their approach to public relations, 'do this not just to get ahead, but because they are progressive, ethical and responsive to the likely demands of their stakeholders.' Gregory's point relates back to Roddick's approach and adoption of ethical auditing.

5.3 Strategic

A strategic approach to issues management involves planning. Described by Mullins (1993:368) as, '...(translated from the French *prevoyance* = to foresee, and taken to include forecasting) examining the future, deciding what needs to be achieved and developing a plan of action.'

It also involves the discipline of management which addresses the question; Is management an art or a science?

‘Clearly management must always be something of an art, especially in so far as it involves personal judgement and dealing with people. However, it still requires knowledge of fundamentals of management, and competencies in the application of specific skills and techniques.’ (Mullins 1993:367)

This statement was reinforced in the research by the vice-president of chemicals and solvents of Shell Chemicals UK: “Virtually all business decisions require judgement - otherwise robots could operate businesses.”

Heath (1997:16) believes that it is essential for a strategic approach to issues management, to refer to four key elements:

‘(a) Systematic issues identification, scanning, monitoring, and analysis allows firms to intersect public opinion at formative stages.

(b) Issues management helps organisations be proactive rather than reactive.

(c) It supplies corporate executives with ample empirical and qualitative analysis to solve corporate planning problems.

(d) Two-way communication can reach constituencies in a way that is collaborative and long range rather than short term. It is not limited to periodic press releases, media relations and strategies.’

Heath’s point c, is reflected by John Williams from Fishburn Hedges’ public relations department (PR Week 1997:7): “There is still the need to advise on issues management and crises or deal with specific newspapers or broadcasters but the desire of CEOs [chief executive officer] to manage issues is constantly increasing. Every Brent Spar strengthens their desire to bring communications round the table. We are getting consulted more and the access to CEOs and their willingness to listen is improving.”

This statement puts into context that issues management is recognised as an integral part of the public relations function and is being taken on at board-room level.

However, Heath (1997:4) raises the question, 'Is the function [issues management] expected to reactively justify strategic planning, or is it vital to proactive strategic planning?'. Whichever the case Heath draws on Lukasiak (1981), Spitzer (1979) and Zarket (1981) who state; 'In either case, the function cannot succeed without executive level authority and budgetary support'. These opinions also strengthen Williams' statement; "We are getting consulted more and the access to CEOs and their willingness to listen is improving." (PR Week 1997:7)

The techniques and outcome of public relations practice vary so greatly because of the human element. As Hitchcock and Hughes (1989:28) explain, 'Human beings are thinking, feeling, conscious, language - and symbol-using creatures....Human beings are capable of choice and have the ability to act upon the world and to change it in line with their own needs, aspirations, or perceptions.'

Public relations professionals need to use their judgement and experience to evaluate which is the most appropriate technique to use when managing issues. The next chapter explains the researcher's rationale behind the methodology used to conduct this research project.

6. Methodology

This chapter outlines the reason for undertaking this enquiry; choice of case study sites; data gathering - techniques addressing reliability, feasibility, generalisation and validity, and primary research in the form of interviews.

The decision to study strategic and reactive issues management when looking at how public relations practitioners practise their occupation, arose from the researcher's experience of being the acting public relations officer, north, for Nuclear Electric Limited on a year placement. As the foci for this enquiry was the placement location and two other industries a decision was taken to use a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. By using in-depth research techniques the aim was to gather in-depth data that the researcher believed was not possible through a quantitative survey. This chapter outlines the rationale behind the methods selected for gathering data and the problems encountered.

Qualitative research within the industry can give an insight into how public relations professionals practise. The use of questionnaires was considered but rejected, as guaranteed return from a postal questionnaire is unreliable and the researcher believed that this method would not obtain the information desired for the research.

Robson (1993:60/61) explains, 'qualitative rather than quantitative methods tend to be used (though not exclusively) because of their sensitivity, flexibility and adaptability'. Owing to the subject of issues management which is often sensitive, the researcher believed that there was a need for face-to-face contact with the interviewee; therefore the primary research draws upon, 'the observations provided by subjects through interview and life experience, personal experience and case study' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994:12).

The researcher used these methods because it enabled her own observations to be recorded while ‘still uncovering the meanings [her] subjects bring to their life experiences’.(Denzin and Lincoln 1994:12)

6.1 Case study approach

This enquiry was approached through case study, and is a combination of instrumental case study and collective case study (Stake 1994:237). Instrumental case study examines a particular case to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory, which is the focus of this investigation.

As Stake (1994:245) also explains: ‘Case studies are of value in refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalisation. The utility of case research to practitioners and policy makers is in its extension of experience. The methods of qualitative case study are largely the methods of disciplining personal and particularised experiences.’

The two points which Stake (1994) makes regarding ‘refining theory’ and ‘extension of experience’ are the focus of this investigation. and one of the reasons to approach this enquiry through the approach of case study sites.

By definition case study is concerned with the ‘interaction of factors and events’ Bell (1987:8). Yin (1989:23) explains: ‘A case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.’

Yin’s explanation clearly states that case study research is the investigation of a particular phenomenon such as an event, a process, an institution or, in terms of this research, three public relations professionals who share a common experience: issues management. This enquiry also draws upon the accounts of journalists to establish how the media interprets the information received or

discussed with the public relations officer, and hence helps form public opinion about how issues have been managed.

Case studies are also concerned with contexts. As Walker (1986:189) says: 'the case study worker collects information in biography, intention and values which allows the researcher 'to capture and portray those elements of a situation that give it meaning'.'

As Stake (1994:243) points out there is also 'nothing more important than making a proper selection of cases'. With this in the mind the case study sites needed to have some typicality and to 'offer opportunity to learn'. The sites were selected taking into account what the researcher wanted to find out:

- To choose cases which represented a cross-section of the business world
- To choose cases dealing with sensitive information and the potential to deal with difficult information on matters of public concern
- To choose cases which had a well established in-house public relations department.

6.2 Data gathering

When investigating the various methods of gathering data it was useful to consider the following points raised by Edwards and Talbot (1994:70):

- 'Is this method going to get the kind of information I need?
- Can I be sure that I am building up as accurate a picture of the event(s) I am studying as I possibly can?
- Can I manage to do this with the people concerned in the time available?'

These questions can be explained as validity, reliability, feasibility and generalisation.

6.2.1 Validity

The interviews aimed to establish whether or not public relations professionals used judgement, improvisation and used their own intuition and the experience of other practitioners when managing issues. The claims of validity are limited as the researcher did not gain information from more than one source of the case study sites; therefore triangulation was not conducted. If the researcher had had more time and greater resources this would have been a valuable source of information to gain other perspectives on how public relations practitioners manage issues when not faced with the familiarity of their own organisation.

The validity of this enquiry could have been increased with the co-operation of interviewees, if over a period of time the case study subjects wrote reflective diaries of how they managed issues and situations which they were faced with on a daily and weekly basis.

6.2.2 Reliability

In order to gain reliability for the interview situations, a set semi-structured face-to-face interview was designed, to be administered during a 30 minute time period.

6.2.3 Feasibility

Before starting this enquiry to ensure that it was feasible, it was necessary to design a realistic timetable to ensure that the research could be completed. It was also necessary to gain the agreement of the chosen case study sites and those being interviewed. A time limit was placed on these interviews, which is discussed later in this chapter, for two main reasons. Firstly, for consistency, secondly to take into account the time needed to transcribe and type up the interview material and was sufficiently restricted to be agreeable to the research subjects with other commitments.

Timescales and accessibility to cases were the fundamental considerations for the feasibility of this investigation.

6.2.4 Generalisation

By concentrating on a small number of case study sites the researcher was concerned about making generalising statements on the sample collected however, Hitchcock and Hughes (1989:27) state, 'Many researchers have moved away from attempting to deliver large-scale generalisations and indeed generalisation as such is no longer seen by many as either the ultimate or only goal of social research.'

The researcher's aim was therefore not to produce a large scale generalisation from the specific sites but rather to illuminate the similarities and differences in the methods utilised by the press offices for managing issues.

6.3 Primary research

The principal method of research for this enquiry was primary data collection through interviews. One method was used as this focus enabled additional secondary research material to act as a check in the conclusions and recommendations chapter. It was also felt that by using one method the enquiry would be deeper and enable common themes and patterns to emerge across the case perspectives.

The interviews took place in the professional's natural setting to let the interviewee feel comfortable and therefore using qualitative methods was thought to be the most appropriate research technique.

6.3.1 Why not other methods?

The researcher decided against conducting questionnaires with the public to obtain their opinions on whether the sample could differentiate between news coverage of an issue which had been dealt with reactively and one that had been dealt with strategically. This was because it was felt the average interviewee in this context would not understand the role of the public relations professional and through explanation of their role could lead to bias in the respondent's response. Although these findings would have been beneficial to

this enquiry in terms of triangulation of the perceptions of the interviewees, the focus of the investigation was on the possibility of grounding public relations theory in public relations practice.

Bell (1987:91) describes the advantage of interviewing as: ‘A major advantage of the interview is its adaptability. A skilful interviewer can follow up ideas, probe responses and investigate motives and feelings, which the questionnaire can never do. The way in which a response is made (the tone of voice, facial expression, hesitation etc.) can provide information that a written response would conceal. Questionnaire responses have to be taken at face value, but a response in an interview can be developed and clarified.’

The main disadvantage of interviews is that they are time consuming and there is always the risk of bias (Bell 1987:91). By taking into consideration the interviewees’ busy schedule, a limit of 30 minutes was placed on each interview. This time limit proved sufficient but more time would have been advantageous. However, the researcher needed to be adaptable and fit into the respondents plans even if inconvenient. To conduct the interviews within a realistic time-span was paramount to obtain the data required for this investigation.

6.3.2 Face-to-face semi-structured interviews

The interviews took a semi-structured face-to-face format which as for reasons explained previously enabled the researcher to control the questioning to obtain essential information in a short period of time, while leaving room to expand the questioning from the interviewees’ responses (appendix I).

Despite encouraging the interviewees to talk about their experiences it was also important to take into account what Edwards and Talbot (1994:88) point out: ‘What you hear may be interesting but it is an abuse of your own skills unless you are willing to take on a full counselling commitment.’ It was therefore necessary to be able to control the situation, while obtaining the information

needed in the time allocated but at the same time not letting the interviewee tell their life story.

The interviewees were encouraged to talk about their previous job experience in order to discover how well their previous experience had equipped them for the issues they now needed to manage.

A pilot semi-structured face-to-face interview was conducted with, a member of the corporate communications department of Glaxo Wellcome UK. This was to test the questions and gauge the level of understanding or whether confusion was created by the questions. The interview structure was adjusted to reduce ambiguity and misunderstanding which was detected through this interview.

In order that the interviews could be documented without the need for note-taking, a dictaphone was used, which required the consent of each participant. This technique worked extremely well as the interviewee had the full attention of the interviewer and neither were distracted by the note-taking process. It ensured that the interview was accurate, factual and flowed when transcribing the interviews. By keeping eye-contact with the interviewee it was possible to observe changes in body language, establish a rapport and generally listen. This also enabled a change of line in questioning if the interviewee became uncomfortable. With the topic under investigation revealing sensitive information at the beginning of each interview it was made clear that the tape would be stopped and the discussion if desired, could continue without recording, owing to the confidentiality of the subject being discussed.

Journalists were interviewed because these individuals, through their medium of press, radio, television and Internet technology, act as the potential mediator between the primary source, the organisation through the press officer, and how this is then interpreted and received by the public (appendix II).

Gregory (1996:37) explores this idea and talks about, 'the media as a reflector of public opinion is vital to public relations because the same channel is used to

put across public relations messages'. Gregory continues, 'public opinion, often expressed through the media or even encouraged by the media, is a very potent influence on organisations.'

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with four public relations practitioners (one as a pilot), two journalists and a manager of Shell Chemicals UK:

Media Relations Manager for Eurostar (prp1)

Chief Press Officer Nuclear Electric Limited (prp2)

External Affairs and Media Relations Manager for Shell Chemicals UK (prp3)

Member of Corporate Communications Department Glaxo Wellcome.

Two journalists:

Ex-journalist and assistant production editor for Lancaster and Morecambe newspapers (journalist A)

Ex-journalist and group editor of the Anglia Advertiser Series (journalist B).

6.3.3 Semi-structured telephone interviews

It was not possible to meet the interviewees below who had agreed to participate in this investigation therefore these interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant and conducted over the telephone:

The vice-president of Solvents and Chemicals Shell UK

Freelance journalist and partner in PMA Training (journalist C).

The participants were given copies of any transcriptions made to check for factual accuracy.

As Bell (1987:95) states: 'There is always the danger of bias creeping in to interviews.....many factors can influence responses, one way or another. Borg draws attention to a few of the problems that might occur:

‘Eagerness of the respondent to please the interviewer, a vague antagonism that sometimes arises between interviewer and respondents, or the tendency of the interviewer to seek out the answers that support his preconceived notions are but few of the factors that may contribute to biasing the data obtained from the interview. These factors are called *response effect* by survey researchers.’ Borg (1981:87)

Bell (1987:95) and the researcher agree that ‘it is easier to acknowledge the fact that bias can creep in than to eliminate it altogether.’ Therefore by using the same standard questions and elaborating on participant’s responses this tried to avoid bias.

Chapter seven draws together the primary data and analyses the findings from the public relations professionals’ interviews and journalists’ interviews.

7. Findings and Analysis of Data

7.1 Public relations practitioners

This chapter explains how the interviewees manage issues as public relations professionals and, where appropriate, illustrate which contexts have required reactive and strategic approaches. It will also draw upon journalists' accounts of dealing with information from press offices and their role as potential mediators of information to the public.

The data will be analysed in two ways. Firstly, in terms of Kitchen's (1997:33) approach to issues management: 'the process of identifying issues, analysing those issues, setting priorities, selecting programme strategy options, implementing a programme of action and communication, and evaluating effectiveness.' Secondly, in terms of McNiff's (1993) action-learning cycle. These two approaches will make sense of the data through existing theory. Then the possibility of public relations practitioners creating their own theory of their practice, will be considered.

These results will explore the description by Denzin and Lincoln (1994:12) who state that; 'Subjects or individuals, are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intuition; all they can offer are accounts, or stories about what they did and why.'

7.1.1 Analysis through existing theory (Kitchen:1997)

Kitchen (1997:33) used a six stage model to issues management. The representatives from Eurostar, Nuclear Electric Limited and Shell Chemicals UK discussed their companies approaches to managing issues by using examples.

7.1.2 Stage one: Identifying issues

Issues management is being taken seriously at boardroom level and chief executive officers are beginning to realise the value of this technique within the

increasing business world of accountability to stakeholders, as an invaluable function (as discussed by John Williams from Fishburn Hedges in chapter 5). All of the organisations represented in this enquiry described *'an open door policy'* to the chief executive and felt that this was essential.

It is important that there is someone at boardroom level who is responsible for crisis and issues management, so that action can be taken as and when necessary.

"We are kept informed in advance from way in advance to the last minute - it's really a case by case story. We have a very close relationship with executive committee and the chief executive officer, the CEO. We have an open door policy with him. We feel very comfortable about talking to him and even higher up in the Shell Group, especially if we have a big deal." Prp 3

This view is also supported by Nuclear Electric Limited and Eurostar. As Prp 2 stated: *"The chief executive and operational directors come and talk to me about issues which are happening. We have a very open culture."* Prp 1 also commented: *"It so happens that our room, our office is two doors away from the managing director's office. I think that he saw the usefulness of this and is why he changed it back to direct reporting line to him. So that is handy. It is almost by accident that one says it shouldn't be there, it shouldn't influence by the logistical arrangement but nevertheless that is how it works out. I think that's right that a managing director should have his public relations team very close to him."*

7.1.3 Stage two: Analysing those issues/ Stage three: Setting priorities

Stage two and three will be analysed together as the interviewees appeared to analyse the impact of the issue in conjunction with setting priorities on how to manage the issue.

Shell Chemicals UK have what they call a 'process' in place which involves raising the awareness levels of managers and employees within the company towards what can be categorised as an issue with impact for the company. Prp 3 explained: *"We have a workshop which we work very much with the business people. It's really to raise the awareness of the danger of the media; if we don't tackle the issue in advance. The second thing we do is when we have raised their awareness level, we go and ask them to identify those issues."*

Prp 3 went on to say that for example, the vice-president of chemicals and solvents: *"...he's currently the issue owner for what we call 'the illegal use of solvents in narcotics'. You can use some solvents to make drugs and we don't mean to sell solvents to drug dealer but it can be bought by someone who will sell it back to the dealers - ring money. So we have to make sure that the people we sell to don't do that, it's a very big issue. And he is in charge of making sure we have questions and answers on that so we can deal with that and so we're in a good position. He or someone in his team monitors the ups and downs of that issue. So that's the process."*

Nuclear Electric Limited uses a similar process but the industry uses an 'issues management matrix' and draws upon the outcomes of emergency exercises, personal experience, contacts and judgement when handling a situation. Referring to the management of issues Prp 2 explained that the company has two approaches: reacting as and when an issue appears and being able to plan a response.

Prp 2 stated: *"As far as planning is concerned, we use the same contacts - plus a few others - to keep us advised of any issues that may require some PR input. For example we know well in advance if one of our reactors is due to be shut down for maintenance, or if - as we did recently - we are due to give evidence to one of the many House of Commons committees."*

To ensure that that everyone knows who has responsibility for particular sections relating to forthcoming events we produce a monthly calendar - it's really a simple matrix - showing what events are happening when, who has responsibility for managing them, who is responsible for any PR material - Qs and As, press releases etc. Whether we need to undertake specific training of spokesmen and when the issue should be finalised. One person is in overall control of the 'diary', she also has the responsibility of making sure that everybody completes their allocated tasks on time. The matrix is issued to all PR staff, directors and appropriate managers on a monthly basis."

The approach adopted by Nuclear Electric Limited is very similar to the techniques employed by Shell Chemicals UK, regarding training, preparation and allocating responsibilities to staff who specialise in a particular issue field.

In the short term the preparation of response is slightly different as Prp 2 explained: *"If you get caught on the hop and you're forced into a quick response, nine times out of ten your immediate response is your right response and you then spend time thinking about why you shouldn't do it....But sometimes in reactive mode the first instinct is the right one and that's the one you go with and you try and argue yourself out of it."*

The analyse of issues is also reliant upon contacts within the organisation as well as outside, as Prp 2 states: *"I couldn't do my job without relying on people to give me hard and fast information. In fact, we couldn't do the job as effectively if we didn't have the people who were prepared to give us the time, because they trust our judgement and they are happy for us to have that information.....we usually have a list of people who we can go to, to gain information so we can deal with the issue."* However, the information which the public relations offices uses must be accurate because, *"if you don't have accurate information you may as well go and find another job."* (Prp 2)

The importance of awareness between organisations is illustrated by, **Eurostar** with regards the Channel Tunnel fire in 1996. Eurostar was completely reliant on the messages which Eurotunnel its operator was communicating. Prp 1 explained that: *"It wasn't actually our infra-structure and it wasn't one of our trains. It's important to remember that. It was a Eurotunnel freight shuttle it was not a Eurostar train, and in fact our service had completed for the day. We were very reliant on what Eurotunnel was doing and what the emergency services were doing, but quite clearly it was building up to a much bigger incident which was going to have a direct impact on us."*

Prp 1 explained in the interview that the strategy which Eurostar adopted was: *"...whenever an issue arises if its appropriate and it normally is, the first message is:*

What are we doing for the customer?

How are they protected/ safe?

How do we look after them?

Do we give them their money back?

Was a member of staff able to help?

All of these issues. It's customer lead, always from the outset."

The importance of communication and setting priorities is illustrated by the Eurostar example and can also be linked to the next section on selecting programme strategy options.

7.1.4 Stage four: Selecting programme strategy options

Planning and forethought by the respondents indicated to the researcher that a strategic approach had been used to identify the issues. Action had been taken to find out as much information as possible about the potential and likely impact of the issue on the organisation. This took various approaches which included, speaking to experts within the company, writing briefing documentation for internal and external use, monitoring the trends of the external environment and formulating an action plan to deal with the issue.

The researcher also discovered that it is not always possible to react to situations in a fully prepared manner as Prp 3 stated: *"We won't be proactive in terms of calling the media and saying, 'hey we've got a great story for you', but we will be ready. I don't recall, I maybe wrong but in my seven years experience in the chemical industry of ever being told of a story or issue by the media. I always knew about them before, very often I was absolutely ready. Sometimes I wasn't completely ready but I knew what they were talking about."*

What planning can achieve is make the response quicker and save time when as Prp 1 explained, *"time is absolutely of the essence"*. Whereas the approach of Prp 2 in his particular case was that: *"...we were able to build a credible defence and strategy in advance. We picked the brains of various PR professionals as well as assessing the success or otherwise of previous attempts at managing the problem."*

7.1.5 Stage five: Implementing a programme of action and communication

In order to deal with an issue successfully, the training and testing of staff and organisations was a key element which transpired from the research. At this point it was evident that the organisations being investigated had all connected the seriousness of an issue which is left to develop into a crisis. It is not enough to have a well oiled and aware public relations team because in the eventuality of a crisis these select members of an organisation will not be enough of the company's resources to deal with the situation. As Prp 3 explained: *"One thing in issues management which you haven't touched on is training. Training is fundamental, not my training but their [business managers] training. I take issues management workshops and if I find that they're not aware enough then they'll go on special training with external consultants and media training. I find training extremely important for the awareness level for the competencies they need to have."*

The use of training and testing was supported by Prp 1: *"I certainly think that it [training] helped, you can train for all types of incidents...the incident will never go as you've planned out on the table but what it does do is help you get your thoughts a little into gear and it will probably save you a little time as well, when time is absolutely of the essence."*

7.1.6 Stage six: Evaluating effectiveness

Evaluation is often overlooked in public relations, however, the interviewees were aware that they did evaluate their work and saw how their actions could be improved in the future.

Prp 2 stated that: *"..it is possible to learn and adapt as you go on"* and went on to say, *"Although in the back of your mind may be something that you have seen or read in the past, essentially the decision is based on the information you have to hand, previous dealings with the people concerned, or your own experience."* This was also reflected by Prp 3 who explained: *"We have a process, we had a process, we are reviewing that process but we definitely have a process."* Prp 3 went on to explain that, *"To fight against these issues, we undertake what we call 'risk assessment' which costs a fortune. I'm not saying that they're not useful, but they cost a fortune...and is simply because we need to justify our licence to operate."*

The public relations function is complex, and creating awareness of an organisation's business and activities is fundamental to the success of the company. The next section analyses the responses of journalists in relation to communications theory and the journalists perceptions of public relations.

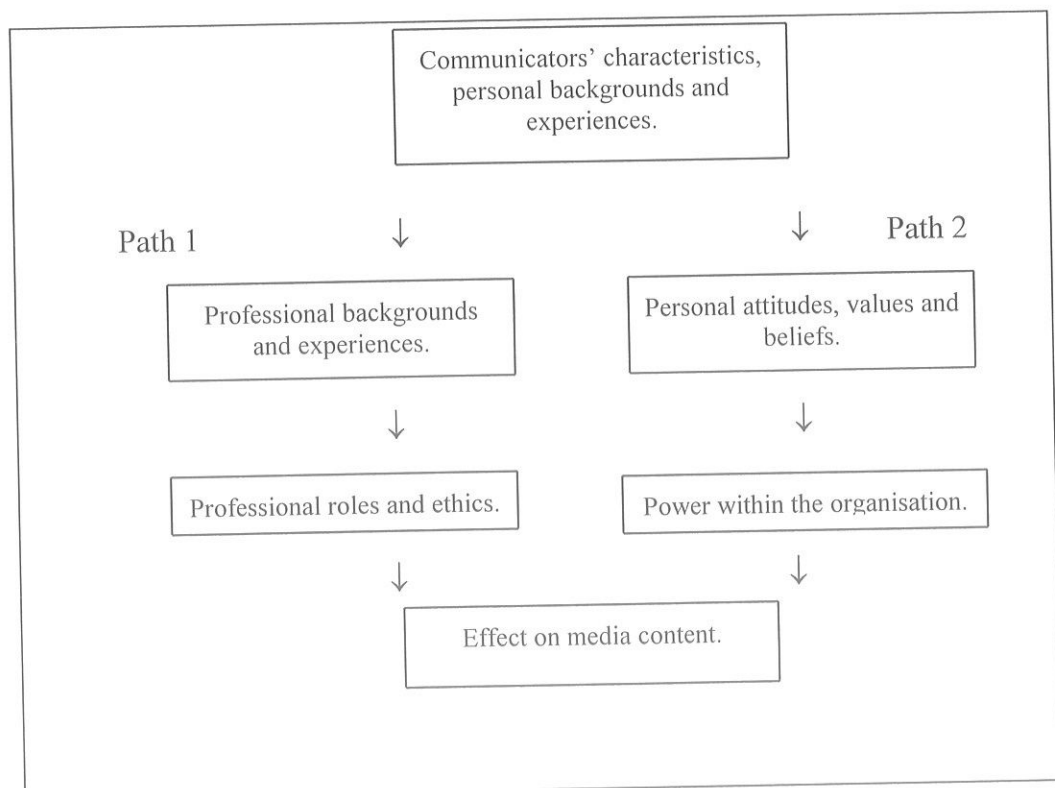
7.2 Journalists

7.2.1 Analysis through communications theory (McQuail:1994)

McQuail (1994:201-202) draws upon Shoemaker and Reese (1991) who suggest that, 'lines of influence can follow one or another of the paths shown in the diagram below. In essence, what is shown are two alternative paths, one in which an organisational role subordinates or conceals personal characteristics, and another in which having power or status in an organisation permits an individual communicator to express their personal beliefs and values in public communication.'

**How factors intrinsic to the communicator may influence media content:
institutional versus professional pathways.**

(Shoemaker and Reese 1991, in McQuail 1994:202)



The intrinsic factors which influence the interviewees when reporting on an organisation can be related back to open, honest and trustworthy

communication on the behalf of the public relations professional and journalists. Journalist A believed that building up good contacts is based very much on trust: *"You build relationships through trust and honesty. We can be honest and above board and you win trust that way. I'm not saying that you should smooth over everything that they tell you, but you build up that trust, what you do is treat every story on its merit. So, what you would do is probably back off the odd story so you win rapport and when the big story does come along, you can say, 'look we did this job for you and that job, now it's time to come clean and do this, that and the other'."*

Journalist C stated that: *"Yes, I have to say that if you have a bad news story it doesn't mean you're not going to write it. I think that most of the journalists I know, certainly would say 'I'm going to write this story'. But if you know the people there are nuances, the way you write it, you can tone it down so it's not as damaging as it could be. If people are obstructive and can't be bothered, 'well buster you certainly didn't help me and I'm certainly not going to help you'."* The importance of contacts is reinforced by journalist B who commented: *"Contacts are everything in journalism, contacts are absolutely everything."*

Taking into account what influences journalists when covering a story, journalists also consider whether or not to compromise the rapport which has been built up with their contacts. Journalist B said in response to the question, if you have a good relationship with an industry does this influence the way you report? that: *"No, and I don't think that it should, if you approach the story in the right way....actually this is a fundamental aspect of contacts you have to have trust there"*. Trust is emphasised again by journalist C: *"Yes, the relationship is built very much on trust."*

The common trend which emerged was that *'contacts are everything in journalism'* and trust is one of the most important elements in this profession - from both sides. As journalist B stated: *"It's a two-way street and any*

journalist will tell you that there is a lot of information which comes across the decks which you're not necessarily interested yourself, but you know that there is a value to the public and it's getting that balance right."

The journalistic responses varied as to whether they viewed themselves as 'a mediator between public relations people and the public'. Journalist B agreed by replying: *"I think in a way that they do, it's a deliberate balance. PR at its best is informative and uses journalists to get information across to the public which is informative. At its worst it's lazy, it's not informative and if that's combined with a journalist who needs something to fill a space and lazy journalism the public is not getting the service it requires. But it's a two-way street and journalists do have to realise that the press office has its own agenda. So it's a delicate balance and together they do moderate the information which is passed onto the public."*

Therefore journalist B would view that his experience as a journalist and of press offices would direct him down **path one** of Shoemaker and Reese's model. This means that he would be directed by his professionalism and the professionalism of the public relations practitioner to supply factual and accurate information.

Journalist C states: *"My role isn't to publicise a company or organisation....I'm not going to write, 'this is a wonderful company' and 'they do wonderful things' and 'the people who work there are wonderful'. Or the awful made up quotes you often read because I'm going to write my own quotes and get genuine quotes rather than made up ones."* This statement reflects that journalist C would also take **path one**.

Whereas journalist A would take **path two** by stating that: *"I think that the media have their own agenda in terms of news values which very rarely taps into what the public want. They go down their own line of filling newspapers with what they perceive as being interested by the public....which isn't*

necessarily the case.” He would be directed by the beliefs of the publication he was writing for, and by what the newspaper believed was newsworthy.

For example, in response to the question: does professionalism and speed with which they are supplied information influence an organisation’s coverage? - produced agreement from the three journalists: “...*absolutely vital. Your coverage gets better, the better response you give to a question.*” (journalist A). “*It’s an important factor...if they’ve helped and it will help them and the company, I will probably slip in a name or something,*” (journalist C) and “*very much so*” (journalist B).

Botan & Hazelton (1989:163) support the comments from the interviewees from journalistic disciplines regarding trust as they write: ‘Understanding is sought in quality journalism. A skilful reporter’s objectivity is assisting by not resorting to fiction or opinion but presenting the facts with supplemental information or helpful contexts.’

The strong value of trust which was communicated to the researcher by these interviews is also held strongly by the public relations practitioners. When discussing the importance of good contacts, those internal to the company (employees) and those external to the company (journalists), trust was paramount.

Prp 2 explained trust from the public relations practitioner’s perspective: “*Your contingencies are already there. You’ve done the ground work, so when he [journalist] comes to you and asks for the information on a negative story, he’s likely to believe what you tell him because you haven’t let him down in the past. He knows that you’ve been honest and trustworthy. That doesn’t mean that you should expect him to sweep a story under the carpet, because clearly they can’t do that.*” Prp 2 continued to state: “*What’s more likely to happen is if you had a relationship with a journalist who trusts your decisions, who you haven’t let*

down in the past and you've supplied accurate information, he's far more likely to accept your story than someone else's."

This opinion is also reinforced by Prp 1 who explains: *"They [journalists] would rather have a correct piece of information than something that's guessed at and again that's about trust, trust with your journalist."*

The researcher has analysed the primary research data in relation to existing theories of management and communications. The researcher believed that the focus of her dissertation relied upon this analysis being taken a step further and analysing the public relations practitioners accounts in relation to creating their own theory of public relations through using McNiff's (1993) action learning cycle.

7.3 Public relations practitioners

7.3.1 Analysis through action learning cycle (McNiff:1993)

The action learning cycle is referred to by McNiff (1993) in her contents as: '*I experience a problem, I imagine a solution, I act, I evaluate, and I modify.*' This process when implemented by an individual, and in this case the public relations practitioner, the researcher believes can go towards creating an explanation of public relations practice.

This approach is supported by Holman et al (1997:137) who draw upon Klob's theory (1984) of experimental learning: 'To learn effectively managers must reflect on their experiences. From this insight new theories, hypotheses, concepts or schematas are created or transformed. These new ideas are then tested out in action which leads to further experience.'

7.3.2 'I experience a problem'

The interviewees explained how they managed issues by using examples to discuss their decision-making process. Prp 3 used the example of '*the illegal use of solvents in narcotics*'. Prp 2 discussed various issues including '*a court case at Wylva, a turbine fire at Heysham 1 power station and giving evidence to one of many House of Commons committees*'. Whereas Prp 1 discussed his involvement with the Channel Tunnel fire. Each of the case study representatives identified '*a problem*' which they had to resolve. Prp 1 explained that: '*where intuition comes into it is how you view something and detecting when a story is going to develop into a big story and you've got something which could be a silly enquiry and suddenly you think; 'Hang on a minute this could be an issue rather than a silly enquiry.*''

7.3.3 'I imagine a solution'

Each of the interviewees addressed the problem of how to solve the issue which they needed to manage by thinking of a plan of action.

Prp 2 said that: *"Yes I suppose it does. It's up to me to assess what the implications are for the business, from the question, if it's likely to be business sensitive."* Depending upon whether the issue has been planned and a strategy has been designed or whether the issue surfaced that morning and a response is needed in the afternoon will require different action plans. Prp 2 explains that if it is a reactive situation then: *"We may as well as be proactive and get our message over first, rather than be on the backfoot waiting for the hit to come."* Each of the public relations practitioners interviewed worked through an established issues management 'process' to approach the problem but practical experience was drawn upon to create a solution. There was a strong use of contacts within the organisation to establish background about the issue and all three practitioners reiterated the comment by Prp 1: *"There is a strong network which exists....There is no way a team of six people can possibly, even if they had the time by wandering around, find out what's going on."* Prp 3 reinforced this by explaining her use of 'issues handlers' who exist in each department and are given the task of ensuring that the public relations department is briefed on all the relevant information relating to that issue.

7.3.4 'I act'

The importance of gathering data on which to make a decision is vital. This process takes place throughout the public relations decision process and depending upon the type of issue which the public relations professionals are faced with, depends upon the response which they will use. However, when acting upon an issue, judgement is something which two of the sites felt placed an important role in this process. Prp 1 explained that: *"it was a judgement decision based upon the information that was given to me at that stage."*

7.3.5 'I evaluate'

Prp 1 explained that: *"quite clearly we were monitoring the situation with a view as to whether we could start the following morning."*

Prp 2 evaluates the action plan which was used to manage the Heysham 1 power station turbine fire in 1997: *"A good example of that which you'll be*

very familiar with is the silly fire at Heysham 1. Where it was a mickey mouse story properly covered in the local newspapers, though through being caught on a slack news day spiralled all the way out of control 'til you get questions asked in the Irish Parliament. Now, no one could have predicted that that was likely to happen. I don't think that the person at the station who dealt with that displayed any lack of judgement with what he did. I just think that it's fairly unfortunate that the circumstances conspired.... So there is a question of judgement there and that actually covers the answers you give, you answer the question but you may not give all the information."

This last comment is reinforced by Prp 3 who states that: *"the rule with me is just answer the question. Stick to the facts and if you don't know, phone back"*.

7.3.6 'I modify'

This stage reflects the public relations practitioner's ability to modify their actions when managing an issue. This modification is illustrated by Prp 1's account of managing Eurostar's position in view of the Channel Tunnel fire in 1996.

Firstly, Prp 1 evaluated the situation: *"I then switched on Teletext at home at about 11.00pm and saw that quite clearly the emergency services had been obtained and there was an incident. At that stage my mind told me this is an incident which involves a train, we'd get the people out, get the train out and we can start working normally from tomorrow morning. It won't affect Eurostar because that was all the information we had at that stage."* Prp 1 went to say: *"It wasn't until the early hours, obviously I had media coming onto me because they couldn't get hold of Eurotunnel and all I could tell them was the incident as far as Eurostar was concerned. Which was we weren't directly involved but quite clearly we were monitoring the situation with a view as to whether we could start the following morning."*

Prp 1 then modified his response by saying: *"It was at that stage that I started contacting various senior members of the executive."* Further evaluation took place with the statement: *"We were very reliant on what Eurotunnel was doing and what the emergency services were doing, but it was building up to a much bigger incident which was going to have a direct impact on us."* This statement again leads Prp 1 to modify his actions: *"I managed to contact one of my colleagues who works on the press desk with me and said, in fact I contacted all three of them and I said, 'You actually need to get in as soon as you can because I think we have got a major incident here, basically the Tunnel is not available to us. We can't run any trains and we don't know how long it's going to go on for'."*

The reader can see from this process that Prp 1 was continuously evaluating and from this modifying his response to the changing situation he was involved in. McNiff (1993) believes that individuals can use such professional learning cycles to create their own 'living' theories. They do this in the descriptions and explanations they create for their own professional learning as they seek to improve their practice.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 Conclusions

This enquiry has analysed public relations, communications and management theories and related these theories to the primary data collected. This chapter addresses the question posed in the title of this dissertation, ‘can public relations theories explain public relations practice: an analysis of reactive and strategic issues management through case study’.

The accounts of public relations practitioners and journalists in this enquiry have demonstrated that the current practice of public relations is grounded in the theory base of several disciplines. This can, for example, be seen through the management theories of Mullins (1993) and the communications theories of McQuail (1994) and Windahl and Signitzer (1995). By recognising the influence of management theories on public relations the question : ‘Is public relations just another tool of management?’ can be raised.

There is clear evidence from the primary data analysis (chapter seven) and literature review (chapter three) that the principles of: planning, internal and external communication, open and honest communication, professionalism and the training and testing of strategic plans were adopted by the interviewees in all three case study sites. These elements all work together through exercises and scenarios which are an integral part of their businesses activities.

These commonalties in the research data illustrate that a strategic approach to managing issues is the ideal situation for all the case sites. This was visible by the interviewees’ use of question and answer briefing sheets, preparation for each issue and enlisting the assistance of experts within the organisation for advice. These were all important elements in managing specific issues.

While existing theories help explain these commonalities what is omitted is how each of the public relations professionals exercised professional judgement in specific contexts.

The reason why a totally common approach to the practice of issues management cannot be found is because individuals' interpretation of managing issues differs. This is reinforced by Hitchcock and Hughes (1989:28); 'Human beings are thinking, feeling, conscious, language - and symbol-using creatures....Human beings are capable of choice and have the ability to act upon the world and to change it in line with their own needs, aspirations, or perceptions.'

Current public relations theories are therefore unable to explain totally public relations practice because the theoretical grounding in public relations theory is weak. There is not sufficient evidence in the form of documented accounts of the decision-making process and how public relations professionals work through problems to find a solution. The research in this dissertation has shown that there are limited explanations of how public relations professionals use insight, judgement, intuition and experience which the researcher believes bring together the qualities of the public relations professional.

8.2 Recommendations

If the public relations profession wants to move forward and improve as a discipline in its own right, then it needs to start understanding the decision making process it goes through. There are limitations in the theories discussed, but these explanations can be expanded through a clear examination of individuals' interpretations of their practice towards reactive and strategic issues management.

Public relations practitioners need to recognise that theory is not a blueprint on which to explain and conform in their practice. From this starting point individuals can create their own explanations of their practice, by extending

their theory base and contributing to the PR industry. Popper (1977:268-269) sums this development and exploration of ideas by suggesting that, the ability to think creatively depends upon the ability to break through pre-defined parameters to a problem, this is called, 'creative imagination'. Popper also suggests that the essential qualities of this creative imagination are an intense interest in a problem combined with a readiness to attack presuppositions and an 'imaginative freedom'.

The researcher believes that the public relations industry and practitioners can learn from Popper (1977) and Holman et al (1997) in moving their thinking forward to strengthen the field of issues management.

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