1998

Public relations on the edge of puzzlement: A defence of scholarly research

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Publication Details
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Abstract
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Keywords
guide, relations, public, research, scholarly, defence, puzzlement

Disciplines
Business

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/buspapers/461
Public relations on the edge of puzzlement
A defence of scholarly research

Shirley Leitch and Judy Motion

ABSTRACT
In this article we offer a defence of the scholarly research contained in the special edition of the Australian Journal of Communication on public relations. In particular, we respond to the critique of the special edition offered by Steiner (see pp. 143-160).

INTRODUCTION—or 'TELL 'EM WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO TELL 'EM' (STEINER, 1998, p. 147)

Communication scholarship, particularly that specialising in public relations, has had many critics. In general, those outside of public relations scholarship have seen it as overly narrow and rather outdated. The central purpose of the recent special edition of AJC (Vol 24 (2)) on public relations was to open the field up to more perspectives and to subject public relations to scrutiny and critique. As the opening editorial stated, 'This issue of the Australian Journal of Communication encompasses and critiques a broad range of methodologies, paradigms, and perspectives on public relations' (Leitch & Walker, 1997, p. vii, italics added). It is puzzling, therefore, why Steiner's critique of the special edition is entitled 'Postmodern Public Relations'. The title implies that the editors were only receptive to postmodern approaches, which they were not, and that the special edition contained only postmodern scholarship, which it did not.

In this article, we will clarify the intention and achievements of the special public relations edition in response to Steiner's critique and misunderstandings. We acknowledge, however, that from
Steiner's own perspective, misunderstanding is not possible because understanding is not possible. As Steiner asserts in her introduction within a quote from her preferred theorist, Heidegger, she views the main role of scholars as being to 'accentuate the puzzlement' (p. 156). We will leave it to others to judge, after they have read her article, whether Steiner has achieved her aim. In this article, we will continue to employ what Steiner has labelled an 'irritating manifestation of scientism' (p. 147) in that we will have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Our intention is to provide a readable paper.

**Critique of Steiner—or ‘Tell ‘em’ (Steiner, 1998, p. 147)**

Within the ‘tell ‘em’ section of this article, we will work our way through much of Steiner’s critique. We wish to add the disclaimer here that the views contained in this paper are in no way representative of the views of the other authors Steiner critiques (Heath, 1997; L’Etang, 1997; McKie, 1997; Neilson, 1997; Pieczka, 1997; Taylor & Botan, 1997; Smyth, 1997; Walker, 1997). While we seek to correct some of the more obvious errors made by Steiner with respect to their work, we look forward to their individual responses.

The first point we wish to clarify is that none of the authors whose work was contained in the special edition claimed allegiance to postmodernism. Motion’s work has been influenced by post-structuralist scholarship. Leitch’s work has drawn on post-structuralist and post-Marxist writers but has had a decidedly modernist flavour in that she has consistently sought to improve practice. Neilson’s work has drawn on post-Marxism and has been heavily influenced by the work of Gramsci, Lipietz, Laclau and Mouffe, amongst others. Walker’s work has been quantitative and positivist. The reduction and conflation of these multiple perspectives to the single category of postmodernism is indeed puzzling. Moreover, this reductionism provided the central premise of her paper, which was that the authors criticised were working to assert the dominance of their postmodern paradigm. Given that none of them subscribed to this paradigm and that most would accept positioning within the rhetorical or critical paradigms, Steiner’s paper collapses before it even begins. Moreover, Steiner acknowledges that the ‘respective domains of interest or methodologies’ (p. 144) of the authors are dissimilar even while collapsing them together to fit her Heideggerian critique.

It may be that there was something contained in the special edition that led Steiner to her erroneous conclusion regarding its postmodern predilections. If this was the case, then Steiner might be forgiven for her
error. However, Steiner defines scholarship (as opposed to research) as rooted in careful and detailed literature reviews (p. 144). Any careful and detailed search of the literature would have revealed to Steiner the multiple perspectives of the authors whose work she was categorising. Professor Robert Heath, for example, is a leading scholar in public relations. Even the most cursory glance at the public relations literature would have revealed that this prolific author works within the rhetorical and critical traditions of scholarship (Toth & Heath, 1992). This lack of understanding or knowledge of the authors positions Steiner as someone relatively new to the public relations field who has not read widely.

Steiner recommends that as public relations researchers we turn our attention to the ‘founding beliefs’ (p. 144, italics in original) of the research paradigms we favour. She also recommends a focus on the ‘research process itself’ (p. 143). The value of such self-reflexive scholarship is undeniable. However, the implication to be drawn from Steiner’s paper, that any other focus within scholarship is invalid, is an unsupported, and we believe insupportable, assertion. The special edition unashamedly dealt with ‘PR theory, practice or issues’ (p. 143). As a consequence, we accept Steiner’s description of the special edition but do not regard it as problematic.

Steiner goes on to outline her Heideggerian critique of all forms of scholarship that lie outside her preferred phenomenological paradigm. According to Steiner, all research traditions other than her own fall into the trap of scientism. She acknowledges that Heidegger himself had only positivist and social scientific paradigms within his sights. However, she asserts that his critique applies equally to what she terms ‘“postmodern” constructivist or interpretivist accounts of knowing’ (p. 145). Here, a central source of confusion within Steiner’s paper is revealed. She has categorised interpretivism and constructivism as postmodern, something scholars who work within these paradigms might be surprised to learn. It appears that ‘postmodern’ is a catch-all piece of jargon intended to encompass everything that is neither positivist nor phenomenological. Having set up this fragile, straw-paradigm of technicity, she proceeds to demolish it. The relationship between this fantasy paradigm and the actual content of the special edition is, however, difficult to discern.

According to Steiner, the main characteristics of the technicity paradigm, within which she has placed the special edition, are anthropocentric scientism, exploitation, rationality, control, specialisation, and detachment. These characteristics provide the structure for Steiner’s paper. It is interesting to note that Steiner attacks Leitch & Neilson
(1997) for identifying types of organisations and Motion (1997) for identifying subject positions. Types, categories, or themes, it appears, are 'reductionist' and should not be used in scholarly papers. Instead, we should treat all organisations, for example, as individuals. Of course it could be argued that such an individual focus is equally reductionist. Moreover, the fact that Steiner employs categories in her attempt to critique the work of other scholars suggests that she acknowledges the usefulness of these reductionist devices. Given that Steiner asserts that the purpose of categories is 'control' (p. 152), and, if Steiner is the self-reflexive scholar she urges others to be, then the purpose of her categorisation appears to be an attempt to control how the work of the scholars she criticises is perceived. Yet, Steiner explicitly eschews any 'competition for paradigm control' (p. 150), so her purpose remains a mystery.

Under the first of her categories, Steiner defines anthropocentric scientism as the belief that people discover, create, or negotiate reality. This is a rather odd grouping and one that would be rejected by those who subscribe to any of these views. However, let us examine Steiner's argument further to see where she is attempting to take us. Essentially, Steiner rejects the view that the 'human mind is the engine of knowledge' (p. 149). This rejection has enabled her to treat positivists and postmodernists as though they write from within the same intellectual paradigm. So where does meaning come from? Well, according to Steiner drawing on Heidegger, it comes from within people. She asserts that 'Only people have meaning' (p. 153). So people do not find meaning or create it or negotiate it; they just have meaning. The implication for public relations is clear—practitioners should cease to practise. Communication is pointless. Meaning is a pre-given, innate concept. Learning is impossible, as is persuasion. How one who subscribes to this view could go on to write a postcard, much less an academic paper, is unclear. Indeed, Steiner suggests that if her view of research were to be accepted then 'We would have to watch and listen and do by ourselves or with others' (p. 157). For one who finds research 'difficult, perhaps even foolish' (p. 158), she has nevertheless succumbed to the desire to publish in the academic literature.

Steiner's aim would seem to be the establishment of a new paradigm for public relations. She may be seeking converts to a 'new rule and law by redefining the domain and practices of public relations' (p. 146) in a way that is commensurable with her Heideggerian, phenomenological perspective. There is certainly ample evidence in her article to suggest that this is the case. The final sections of the article, for example, contain
a description of what scholarship would look like if her paradigm were to be accepted. However, Steiner explicitly condemns paradigm struggles, and one of her central critiques of the special edition is that some of the authors (Leitch & Neilson, 1997; L'Etang, 1997; and Pieczka, 1997) are engaged in one. Further, at this point, Steiner asserts that we might look to ‘inanimate phenomena’ instead of to people for ‘knowledge making’. So we are left with a paradigm struggle that condemns paradigm struggles while the resolution of paradigm struggles is left to the inanimate. This formulation is truly puzzling.

Exploitation is the second of Steiner’s categories. Steiner makes a large number of claims within this section. We will deal with each of these claims in turn. Steiner begins by switching from her earlier categorisation of the edition as postmodern to the new, all-encompassing label of ‘cultural theory’ (p. 148). Steiner does not define cultural theory, which makes it difficult to engage with her critique of those who supposedly subscribe to its tenets. Thus, Steiner’s accusation that cultural theory (studies?) is intolerant of resistant thinking cannot be debated until she more clearly explains whom she is accusing and what she is accusing them of. Given that, in the very next paragraph, Steiner returns to the ‘postmodern’ label, perhaps the use of cultural theory was simply an error within the article.

According to Steiner (p. 148), postmodern public relations scholars do not have a strong tradition of research on which to draw. No matter how one interprets this claim, it is problematic. If one interprets it as an attack on postmodernism, then one could point to a very substantial body of academic literature that has all the hallmarks of a ‘strong tradition’. If one interprets it as an attack on cultural studies then, again, there is a strong tradition of research. Finally, if one interprets it as an attack on public relations itself, then Steiner is joining with those she attacks in asserting that there are problems with the mainstream of public relations theory. However, we would not go as far in our critique as Steiner. Instead, we acknowledge the major contributions of, for example, James and Larissa Grunig and Robert Heath, to the establishment of a research tradition within public relations.

Steiner goes on to describe the so-called ‘postmodern’ writers found in the special edition as focused on intangibles such as ‘communication and relations, while ignoring many of the realities of PR practice like its intimate connection with business objectives’ (p. 148). Steiner places the blame for this situation on public relations educators located within communication and media departments. Steiner is clearly unaware that Leitch, Motion, and McKie, all major targets within her piece, are
located within a department of Management Communication at the Waikato Management School. Moreover, Heath's piece was written while a visitor at the Waikato Management School. These affiliations were all noted in A/C. If Steiner was part of the public relations professional or academic community in either New Zealand or Australia, then she would have known that many of the scholars in the special edition are active and long-standing members of their respective public relations institutes. Motion, for example, was a well-received keynote speaker at the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand's, PRINZ's, 1998 annual conference. Our experience of the public relations profession is contrary to Steiner's view that they are a 'small and largely disinterested' (p. 148) profession. Instead, our involvement with PRINZ has led us to view public relations as a vibrant profession with a commitment to scholarship and education.

The International Communication Association, ICA, is the next target of Steiner's article. The drive to achieve acceptance from the 'legitimating academy' (p. 148) is offered as the rationale behind the special edition. Here, Steiner is referring to the recent achievement of divisional status by the group of public relations scholars who belong to ICA. Recognition of divisional status is granted by ICA based on the number of members who sign up to that division. It is a numerical rather than a paradigmatic or political issue. Perhaps Steiner is not a member of ICA and is therefore unaware of the process.

Control is the next category offered by Steiner. Again, Steiner refers to 'cultural theory' (p. 150) rather than (or perhaps as equivalent to?) postmodernism. She states that cultural theory 'with its bizarre, uncommunicative vocabulary ... excludes the marginalised cultures it glorifies' (p. 150). First, given Steiner's own allegiance to terminology such as 'the epoch of technicity', 'anthropocentric scientism' and 'historiological', perhaps she might tread more carefully before accusing others of jargon. Second, it is not clear how, or in what sense, public relations is a marginalised culture. She goes on to make a seemingly contrary statement, which is that public relations practitioners are becoming a marginalised profession because of the work of public relations scholars. We will leave it to Steiner to work through this contradiction in her work.

The central point of the 'control' section, however, is that the special edition is seeking to seize 'ontological control' (p. 150) of public relations. Given the eclectic nature of the special edition, this seems an odd claim. Moreover, given the prescriptive nature of Steiner's own work, it is a claim that seems more justifiably applied to Steiner.
Having questioned the motivation of the special edition (an ICA plot?), Steiner moves on to question whether its contributors were ‘members of the discipline community governed by the paradigm’ (p. 151) that some have critiqued in their work. Steiner attempts to position Motion, Leitch, Neilson, L’Etang, Pieczka, and Heath (but not McKie, Walker, Botan, or Smyth) as being outside the ‘public relations discipline community’ (p. 151). The most surprising member of this list is Robert Heath, who is the editor of the Sage series on public relations. However, because all of the authors she names are published in the public relations literature, it is not clear how Steiner can position any of them as being outside of the discipline. Steiner’s own explanation is to be found in the rhetorical question, ‘Are they “public relations researchers” in the eyes of, say, the Grunigs who are definitely “in” the PR discipline community, including the editors and review panels of PR scholarly journals?’ (p. 151). Just why ‘the Grunigs’ have been assigned as the gatekeepers of acceptance into the public relations discipline is not explained. Further, Robert Heath, one of those identified as an outsider by Steiner, is a member of the editorial boards of both of the two major scholarly journals within public relations, Journal of Public Relations Research and Public Relations Review. Presumably, as an editor and reviewer of these journals, Robert Heath, is accepted as a member of the ‘in’ group.

The issues Steiner raises under the title of ‘specialisation’ have largely been addressed above. In this section Steiner raises a series of rhetorical questions, apparently directed at the authors she critiques, but it is Steiner herself who provides the answers.

Steiner’s final category is ‘detachment’. Here, Steiner mounts an attack on any attempt to theorise, to thematise, or to abstract from experience. Rather than a specific critique of the special edition, then, Steiner’s purpose is revealed as an attack on research per se. She sets up a dichotomy between research and scholarship, claiming allegiance to the latter. Scholarship is defined as rooted in ‘personal, immediate experience and on attention to phenomena as they are experienced’ (p. 154). According to Steiner, and we would concur, this approach to scholarship ‘requires no special expertise’ (p. 155). The reason it requires no special expertise is that Steiner’s scholarship involves ‘interpretation’ which ‘does not involve adding anything to the understanding’ but, rather, simply ‘attending’ to it (p. 155). Later, however, Steiner asserts that scholars ‘need libraries’, which implies that we should attend to more than our own thoughts and experiences. And further on, she urges us to ‘hold conversations with wise elders or perspicacious youngsters’
who we will find 'meaningful, inspiring, and insightful' (p. 158). Just how we are to judge the wise or the perspicacious is not made clear. Certainly, however, they could not be adherents of postmodernism or cultural theory.

**CONCLUSION—OR 'TELL 'EM WHAT YOU TOLD 'EM' (STEINER, 1998, P. 147)**

The stated and, we believe, achieved purpose of the special public relations edition of AJC was to open up public relations scholarship to many different perspectives. It is interesting, therefore, that the sole critical paper about the edition received by AJC has attempted to shut down the debate between the different perspectives when it has barely begun. Steiner's stated worldview is that one should just be in the world, but she seems unable to be in a world that encourages debate between and within paradigms. She expresses a horror of reductionist categorisation but cannot resist reductionist categorisation herself, most notably in her idiosyncratic labelling of the special edition as 'postmodern'. She urges us to attend to the literature, but seems profoundly ignorant of the public relations literature. She urges us to respect the profession, but clearly does not understand the relationship between the profession and the writers she critiques. We do not wish to suggest that the phenomenological perspective has no contribution to make to public relations. Rather, we suggest that the nature of its contribution has yet to be clarified. Given that Heidegger urges us to simply 'accentuate the puzzle-ment', perhaps it never will be.

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*Australian Journal of Communication* • Vol 25 (2) 1998

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