

Notes on a philosophy of communications design

Abstract

Purpose

This article offers the outline of a philosophy for the creation of public relations (PR) programmes. The piece is primarily philosophical in outlook and concerned with the foundational aspects of how public relations plans emerge but also intended also to aid practice in dealing with complexity and making rational choices.

Design/methodology/approach

This is a theoretical paper focussed on the elucidation of the definition of a philosophy of communications design, its meaning and the possibilities of its application to public relations practice.

Findings

The paper argues that the practice of public relations planning can be formulated as a process of communications design and that the philosophy of design can offer a framework for reflection on the foundational elements of PR practice.

Research limitations/implications

The article provides an outline for future exploration of the philosophical aspects of communications design as a fresh area for public relations research and education.

Practical implications

The paper considers how elements of total design philosophy might be operationalised in public relations practice and offers a hierarchical model as a methodological template for public relations planning.

Originality/value

The article introduces literature and debates relating to design philosophy that have not been considered before in relation to public relations in mainstream scholarship and aims to stimulate fresh discussion about the processes that lead to the creation of public relations programmes.

Aim and introduction

We all have our philosophies, whether or not we are aware of this fact, and our philosophies are not worth very much. But the impact of our philosophies upon our actions and our lives is often devastating. This makes it necessary to try to improve our philosophies by criticism. This is the only apology for the continued existence of philosophy which I am able to offer (Popper, 1974, p. 33).

This article offers the outline of a philosophy for the creation of public relations (PR) programmes, from which it derives a template for a methodology for rational communications design. As the title suggests, the notes that follow are primarily philosophical in outlook, but intended also to aid practice in dealing with complexity, making optimal choices and offering a rational methodology for creating PR programmes. The aim is not to offer fresh definitional ideas nor a nascent philosophy of public relations, a proposition defined already by Grunig (1992, p.69) as “a vision of the field and its purpose.” Rather the intention is to offer a fresh perspective on how public relations programmes are created based on critical reflection upon the philosophy of design. So rather than seeking a separation from practice, the intention is to increase awareness among practitioners of the possibilities of incorporating elements of design philosophy in their work as well as stimulating debate among researchers on this theme. This goal is attempted by unpacking the philosophy - that is the foundational elements, concerns and priorities - that underpin the process of creating of PR campaigns. Specifically, the aim is to surface the philosophical and theoretical that is already present in PR practice, even though practitioners may not recognise it as such (much in the way Popper observed in the quotation above). Another philosopher has claimed there is no line between theory and practice “since practice is an irreducible theoretical moment, no practice takes place without presupposing itself as an example of a more or less powerful theory” (Spivak, 1990, p.2). Christopher Alexander (1982), whose work is central to this essay, made a similar argument in a series of writings on *The Nature of Order*, in which he asserted that it is not logical to separate the finished programme or other formal manifestations from the underlying processes which produced it as both are observable aspects of the same element. So what follows is as concerned with offering a robust methodology or process template for practitioners as it is with presenting a philosophy of communications design.

At the outset, it is worth clarifying that for reasons of focus and space, this article deliberately does not develop the theme or practice of creativity in public relations, although creativity is acknowledged as present in the process of communications design. Similarly, the nature of the philosophical issue to be discussed here is a concern is with the assumptions, foundations and methods behind the design of PR programmes and their outcomes, rather than with theory which is framed by and concerned with the current practical dimensions of the field. That is the distinction made in this article, although in the design field, the terms theory and philosophy are frequently used almost interchangeably, and this was particularly so in some of the earlier writing on these themes in the 1960's onwards.. In contrast to the vibrant field of architectural and design philosophy, there has been little discussion of a philosophy of public relations practice nor much theoretical explication of the methodology by which communication programmes are designed. That is to say, the field lacks a philosophical basis to the design of public relations programmes and the methods that lead to them being created. While public relations history has been energetically researched in recent years - see for example Bentele (1997), L'Etang (2004) and Watson (2013) – with the International History of Public Relations Conference now in its eighth year, the lack of philosophical discussion in relation to the creation of public relations plans contrasts with professions such as law, medicine, science and architecture. The history and

philosophy of science and medicine are well established subject areas with extensive literatures and postgraduate study programmes. In addition, this material is taught to medical students as part of their professional curriculum. The University of Cambridge's Department of History and Philosophy of Science even boasts a world-leading museum, the Whipple Museum of the History of Science. The history and philosophy of law is a subject in its own right and also an important part of professional legal training at universities at undergraduate and postgraduate level. In architecture, the philosophy of design and theoretical aspects of design methodology have been included in the undergraduate syllabus for architecture students for many years. In contrast with these professions, the absence of academic inquiry into the philosophical underpinning for the creation of PR campaigns represents a gap in scholarship which this article seeks to address.

Literature review:

Public relations planning and practice

Public relations has developed a rich literature at the definitional level, expanding from an initial period of Grunigian capture, in which a four-stage typology dominated (Grunig and Hunt, 1984) to a wide range of conceptualisations of public relations as, for example, rhetoric (Heath, 1992), discourse technology (Motion and Leitch, 1996), weak propaganda (Molonley, 2006) and dialogic expertise (Pieczka, 2011). Others have emphasised the place of public relations in society and its relation to social theory (Ihlen et al., 2009) with so many definitions emerging that Galloway (2013, p. 157) pleaded for a moratorium on new definitions being offered by the academy, suggesting instead that reflection drawing from ideas from poets, religious traditions and philosophy “could help deliver PR from its obsessive pursuit of definitional exactitude and free the profession to think of itself in more dynamic, adaptive and meaningful ways”. At a practical level, textbook authors have offered helpful planning models concerned with the organisation of campaigns (Gregory, 2000; Theaker and Yaxley, 2012). PR planning models have typically been presented as checklists involving various steps such as Cutlip, et al's (2006) four-step process that encompassed situation analysis (defining public relations problems), strategy (planning and programming), implementation (taking action and communicating) and assessment (evaluating the programme). Beyond these planning templates, in a CIPR book on *PR Strategy*, (2010) Sandra Oliver attempted an integration of strategic planning into PR, and specifically the theory of competitive strategy and five forces model of Michael Porter, a theme which had been earlier pursued by Moss and Warnby (2000, p. 59). The effectiveness of these models has not been empirically tested and indeed the methodological challenges of such a project would be significant, but anecdotally, some have proved useful in practice. This could be because of the generic nature of the tools, which closely resemble templates for marketing and marketing communications planning from textbooks in those fields, such as the SOSTAC (situation, objectives, strategy, tactics, action, control) model offered by Smith and Taylor (2004) and RABOSTIC (research, audiences, budget, objectives, strategies, tactics, implementation and control) from Pickton and Broderick (2005). Again, while viable as tools for organising communications plans, these models are essentially bound in the modern, secular, Western corporate world as applied to either public or private sector. It is debateable how effectively these models could or should be applied globally as methodological templates and how responsive they would be to varied local conditions, such as those identified by Badran (2016, p.5) who, writing on PR in the Gulf States, has eloquently identified the long history of an Arabic notion of public relations as expressed in “hospitality, poetry, oratory, the *majlis* or *divaniyya*, the mosque, emissaries and various local customs.” Such profound local variations suggest limitations for any assumption that a generic or globally-applicable type of PR planning model will be effective in all countries and cultures. In the UK, the two industry bodies,

the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) have offered quite distinct styles of support and guidance to practitioners on the methodology for public relations campaign planning. The PRCA provides an audit of consultancies and in-house teams against a Consultancy Management Standard (CMS) which scores against set criteria such as leadership and communication, business improvements and diversity, with only one of the nine areas - campaign management – relating directly to PR. Indeed, one sign of the remoteness of the CMS from the creation of communication and public relations campaigns is the way it was audited for several years by the shipping and business assurance company Das Norsk Veritas. The CIPR does not offer auditing nor templates for campaign planning but does provide members with a series of toolkits and best practice guides. In contrast, since 1963, the UK's Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) has prescribed an eight stage Plan of Work for the project design and construction which forms a detailed methodology and template for professional practice, mapping tasks to each of the eight stages of the plan: strategic definition, preparation and brief, concept design, developed design, technical design, construction, handover and close out/in use (RIBA, 2017).

Design Philosophy

The purpose of a philosophy of design is “helping, guiding, suggesting how the designer comes to understand what he is doing, and not simply how he comes to do what he is doing” (Wartofsky, (1979). For this reason alone, ideas from the philosophy of design have relevance to communicators because they are concerned with reflection in order to improve practice. Reflection on understanding what one is doing in public relations rather than just understanding how to do it is an insight which can arguably only be pursued through philosophical means and such understanding is a valuable asset for practitioners. Inherent in this type of philosophical inquiry is a concern with rationality and with critical reflection in order to cultivate what Per Galle (2007) of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts which hosts a Centre for Philosophy and Design, has called “conceptual awareness” in relation to how programmes are designed. In a 2002 special edition of the journal, *Design Studies*, Galle laid out the different functions and concerns of a philosophy of design as the conceptualisation of design, the methodology of design, the criteria for quality in design, the phenomenology of design, negotiation and persuasion on interdisciplinary projects (2002, p. 212). Christopher Alexander was arguably one of the first writers to address design philosophy in the modern era and his *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* was concerned with handling complexity and “the need for rationality” in the design process in order to understand and solve problems that “are becoming less simple all the time” (2002, p.1). In considering the challenges of designing programmes and solutions that meet the multiple needs of multiple stakeholders, Alexander’s (1964, p. 59) insight is that a designer’s “chances of success are small because the number of factors which must simultaneously fall into place is so enormous.” In engineering design, Ove Arup (2016) made a similar point that the combination of new materials, new technologies and new types of demands from clients meant that projects were “getting larger and more complex and design is split between dozens of other professions, specialists and contactors”.

The problem of complexity, as presented by Alexander is that any individual practitioner is weak against the scale of problems to be solved, and can only become more effective by acknowledging weakness and taking steps to increase capacity in order to generate solutions. Beyond handling multifaceted requirements, the importance of a philosophical dimension to addressing complexity and bringing coherence to the finished article has been emphasised by architect Adam Caruso who has described design philosophy as “a completely internalised, synthetic way of working” where

issues of delivery and thematic intent “become one” (2008, Caruso, p. 76). Interestingly, while Alexander initially offered formalised mathematical models as the basis for decision making and issue resolution (he graduated with degrees in both mathematics and architecture from the University of Cambridge), in later books, such as *The Pattern Language* (1982), he and his co-authors were more concerned with the patterns, templates and other visual manifestations of the driving forces that underlie the design process, which for Alexander, lead to the synthesis of form. In 2016, London’s Victoria and Albert Museum hosted an exhibition entitled *Engineering the World: Ove Arup and the Philosophy of Total Design*, which showcased the level of abstraction introduced above for the output of a structural engineering firm. Ove Arup himself offered various philosophical insights which, this author argues, apply to the design of communications projects as they do to structural design. Interestingly, despite being a highly capable mathematician, Ove Arup emphasised creativity and a similar move beyond quantitative approaches to that advocated by Christopher Alexander when describing optimal engineering design methodology:

This is a creative activity, involving imagination and intuition and deliberate choice. The possible solutions often vary in ways that cannot be directly compared by quantitative methods. (Arup, 2016)

Arup studied philosophy for four years in Copenhagen before switching to civil engineering in order to pursue what he called “something practical, creative, into contact with people” (Arup, 2012, p.220). The director of research at Ove Arup in the 1990s, Steven Groak, expanded this aspect of the firm’s philosophy to address broader issues of unified design and delivery processes, as well as melding science with architectural criticism in an all-encompassing work on the intellectual and physical aspects of design. His book, *The Idea of Building: Thought and action in the design and production of buildings*, was commissioned by the Building Centre Trust in order to “review many of the underlying principles of why and how we make our buildings” (Sugden, p.xvii, 1992). Groak sought to address what he called “the organisation” (p. 1) of the process of making buildings and the way we think about them, an area he describes as building knowledge and experience. He was also interested in reconciling the “central puzzle of describing the whole rather than the constituent parts”, a problem that is “very old and not restricted to the study of buildings.” (Groak, 1992, p.3). For Groak, this is part of a more “general dilemma – of supposed differences between humanities and the sciences” that leads to preoccupation with parts rather than wholes in a philosophy of design or way of thinking that is “too reductionist.” The result is a comprehensive philosophy on the deliberate ways in which buildings are made, which is illustrated with a chapter on the work of Alvar Alto and his philosophy or “underlying programme of design” and “rational order” which works with the “fundamental flows of nature” (Groak, 1992, p., 229).

Public relations as communications design

Having summarised literature on public relations planning methods and design philosophy, and before moving on to attempt a synthesis of the two in order to develop a summary philosophy of communications design, the case needs to be made for the relevance of architectural, design and engineering philosophy to public relations methodology. A case also needs to be made for the formulation that public relations planning is a creative process of communications design. In short, does the idea of design and public relations planning as communications design fit with the process by which public relations activity is planned in practice? The two fields can both be described as social practices concerned with solving problems of different kinds. Both also involve a degree of creativity in problem solving in order to generate plans for a new type of solution that responds to the specific situational challenges and requirements, as specified by a client and constrained by

contextual factors. The role of a designer has been defined by one philosopher of design as “a conceiver of plans rather than a builder of objects” (Parsons, 2016, p. 23) and the approach offered here proposes that public relations campaigns and other communication programmes are the outcome of a design process of some kind. In this view, communication design is simply the process – some would emphasise the creative nature of the process more than others – by which public relations programmes are produced. Various rationales support this formulation. First, the application of design concepts to outputs such as public relations programmes rather than physical forms has been encouraged in mainstream management literature. “The Evolution of Design Thinking” was the focus of the September 2015 edition of *Harvard Business Review*, with one article claiming that “design thinking has become central to strategy, innovation and organisation culture. Design was a process applied to physical objects...but companies began employing it in more and more contexts” (Brown and Martin, 2015, p. 58). Another writer in the same edition argued in an article entitled “Design Thinking Comes of Age” that professional service firms are “working to create design centric cultures” in order to cope with the high level of complexity they encounter” (Kolko, 2015, p.69). In this broader view, “design is also thinking and thus a cognitive process” that is concerned with “socio-cultural efficiency” (Bonsiepe, 1999, p.27-27) and – like public relations – it is a “social practice” concerned with problem solving (Parsons, 2016, p. 3) in response to the “framing of design problems”.

Another justification for exploring the philosophy of design in relation to public relations is the existence of similarities in the practices and historiographies, particularly when considering PR and architecture. Early histories of architecture (from 15th century onwards) were mainly biographical summaries, an approach gently criticised in the PR history field by Watson (2014). This phase of biography was followed by geographical categorisations, which also feature in PR history (Van Ruler and Dercic, 2004). Generations later, this narrative work was enriched by study of the processes of architecture and, more recently, architecture’s meaning, its place in society and the role of buildings in cultural history. This focus on architecture’s place in society and in culture is another parallel with the consideration that has been given in the public relations field to cultural intermediaries (Edwards, 2012). Beyond architecture alone, all areas of design have shared concerns with PR – and had related debates - around professionalisation and definitional issues relating to whether the practice is a trade, a craft or a profession requiring formal recognition and certification (Dickie, 1984).

The decision to look to architectural, engineering and design was guided partly by the richness of material available on the philosophy of practice in these fields. As summarised above, there are also similarities in the nature of work as well as in the processes involved in generating and delivering finished programmes. Architecture, for example, was not always a profession and even today, not all buildings are designed by architects as it is possible for technicians or indeed anyone to design a building. The inverse truism is that not all buildings are architecture. Similarly, in the field of public relations, not all PR activity is undertaken by professional practitioners, nor can every piece of communication that an organisation undertakes be classified as PR. The review of literature in both fields suggests significant similarities in the issues faced by practitioners, such as the challenges of complexity and scope of projects and the wide range of and potential choices available when designing programmes. In particular, the design challenge in all the fields considered here – architecture, engineering, product design and public relations – share solving the interests of multiple stakeholders in a single unified solution.

A philosophy of rational communication design

Based on reflection upon elements of the philosophy of design, the priority for any philosophy of communications design is to locate public relations practice and its effects as part of a greater whole that responds to societal context and challenges as well as client needs. In this way, a philosophy of communications design addresses the need to view PR programmes in a holistic way within themselves - in ways that organise resources to respond to client requirements and generate the required effects - but also acknowledge that they exist within a greater whole in the way they relate to and affect other interests in society as well as consuming natural resources, in ways that may not be immediately apparent when appraising the scope of the programme.

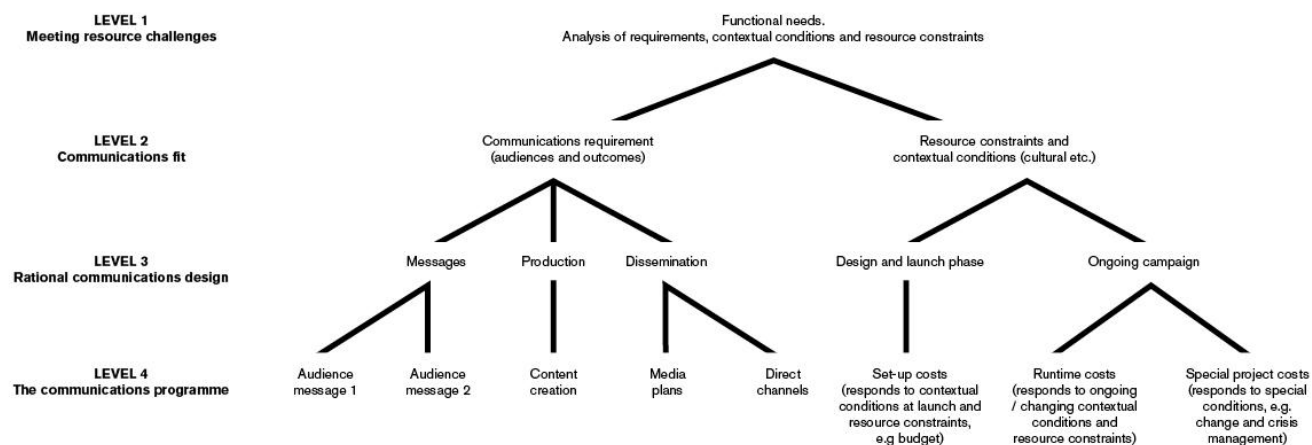
The methodological model offered here is derived from concepts of design philosophy and attempts to apply these ideas to communications programmes. Aspects of the philosophy of design have been used to help consider the specific, fundamental aims and problems associated with communications, addressing questions about the nature of the knowledge applied in public relations, the ethical dimensions of practice and the nature of reality in which programmes are generated. Methodologies from Christopher Alexander's (1964) influential architectural text, *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, have been adapted to suit the structures, sequences and formats that make up public relations campaigns. In particular, the model has embedded learning from the philosophy of design relating to rationality and respect for context. In line with the motivation of those who have offered similar templates for the design of physical forms, the primary intention of philosophically-based communications design is to aid the practice of public relations in handling complex problems in a rational way, with a particular focus on resolving issues across varied cultural contexts. Architectural design has engaged in such debates relating to the dichotomy of the global versus the vernacular for many years, with architect Adam Caruso stressing the importance of regionality and a rejection of the idea of a global aesthetic in his claim that "global architecture isn't really a place for anything or anyone" in describing the philosophy behind his own practice (Levene & Marquez Cecilia, 2013, p.19). By moving to the abstract level of a communications form or plan, a way of working emerges that is detached from constraints such as a global or local view – or shape of a programme – leading to more clarity, more rationality and a more efficient programme design at every level. This level of abstraction is neither reductionist nor prescriptive, and so allows the differences between cultures to be accommodated, as well as incorporating the different moral and ethical principles held by individual practitioners that they may wish to incorporate in their work.

The following four notes are proposed as a starting point for a philosophy of rational communications design. The aim is to propose a conceptualisation of communications planning that is culturally non-specific and so could be universally applicable across different contexts (such as different industries and sectors, for example) as well as in different regions of the world. The resulting programme is not art but is the result of creative process that considered numerous possible solutions at the outset, ranging from the bad, the indifferent and the good. The process by which good programmes are generated is through a synthesis of the means available to the practitioner and the desired end point. This synthetic process fuses imagination in considering the communicative options available, intuition relating to the optimal ways of engaging with audiences and economics in the way resources are selected, allocated and deployed in a rational programme. These principles were offered by the first century Roman architect and writer Vitruvius, whose multi-volume *De Architectura*, or Ten Books on Architecture, is considered one of the first works of architectural writing, in which he laid out that design should be *firmitas, utilitas, venustas* or solid, useful and attractive. Ove Arup (1966) added an economic dimension to these four principles with

his summary that good design should “function well, last well, looks well and cost as little as possible”.

One element of the complexity of modern PR programmes is the interdisciplinary working required in an era of specialisation of different communications functions that can mean achieving a synthesis of purpose among many practitioners who have different skills, experience and priorities. To achieve a unified outcome in these circumstances requires more than simply high-quality team working. The requirement is for a collective understanding of the programme aims, methods and the tools and resources available in order to generate a holistic and coherent solution. This way of working with group sharing a “composite mind” is what Ove Arup (1966) called “total design”, a philosophy that was concerned not only with teams working together but with a comprehensive view which did not only take account of limitations but rather achieved a synthesis between solving problems such resource constraints, the environment and the social requirements in situations where “the client” was the wider community. In considering how elements of this total design philosophy might be operationalised for public relations, four foundational themes have been developed into a corresponding four-level conceptual design hierarchy. This is offered as a guide to implementing what Ove Arup called the “practical thinking” or what the writer and inventor Edward de Bono, with whom Arup collaborated, called “the type of thinking involved in getting things done” (Arup, 2012. p. 216). The hierarchical model developed from the four themes is offered as an outline methodological template for public relations planning and is summarised in figure 1.

Figure 1. A template for rational communications design



i. Meeting resource challenges

Public relations programmes succeed by meeting the functional needs of the commissioner but also have to confront societal and cultural issues as well as the specifics of scarcity of resources. Specifically, it means that frivolous communications to meet the functional needs of commissioners – whether they are governments, campaign groups, corporations or individuals - is inefficient at economic and environmental levels and so not part of a rational design. Whether the resource constraint is time, money or environmental resources, the need for rational allocation in order to solve public relations problems is essential, because if these factors are not prioritised, the programme can fail. This sense of a need for wholeness and totality in considering how programmes are designed and their effects is at the heart of the philosophy of communications

design. This initial assessment of functional requirements is intended to guide the response to the financial constraints of client budgets but also contains an ethical and environmental component. This approach goes beyond taking these factors into account and makes them part of the total design solution, even when the factors are in conflict. This aspect of communications design may involve resolving conflict between client aims and societal or environmental priorities, for example, but can lead to outstanding quality programme if these factors are synthesised in a holistic way. While reluctant to pin these principles upon individual cases, for reasons of illustration, Marks and Spencer Plc's Plan A (2016) for sustainable business is a useful example of this level of integration.

ii. **Rational communications design**

Rational communications design is based on logical thinking and analysis of the requirements, resources and constraints, based on correct and complete data. Fulfilling the aim and meeting client requirements involves practical thinking that is directed at resolving the multiple resource and programme constraints in order to go on and design a campaign of actions to be taken in order to realise the programme and meet the initial requirements. The individual's level of grasp of public relations, social psychology and campaign experience as well as knowledge of specific aspects of the craft of communication is likely to affect the type of solutions considered and chosen. For example, a digital specialist may be more inclined to offer digital solutions if lacking knowledge and experience in other fields. Human factors such as the limited knowledge and skills of individual practitioners in the team can constrain the delivery of rational communications design by missing consideration of options that could contribute to the totality of the final programme. Beyond the human constraints on individual knowledge – which can be overcome through awareness of weakness and the need for a broadening of the expertise in a team - communications designers like engineers and architects deal with amorphous and diffuse conditions of the underlying problem in complex contexts. Making choices in the planning process involves responding to social sensitivities, ethical considerations, variances in human behaviour, communications choices and making value judgements, which cannot all be decided on logic and will depend on intuition as well as logic. Rational communications design helps to manage misfit variables in these categories and generate an optimised solution, normally involving a combination of messages, production and delivery.

iii. **The concept of communications fit**

Communications design aims for fit between communications and context in ways that meet the functional needs of the commissioner in terms of audience reach and other outcomes. Well-fitting communications forms are delivered within economic constraints (of budget and time etc.) and also tend to endure. The sources of communications fit are clarity of message, coherence (in relation to target audiences) sound organisation and audience prioritisation in delivery. The excellent solutions created in this way will often be recognised by practitioner and client alike as offering outstanding communications fit. That is to say, the solution is fit for purpose in the way it fits the context, fits the audiences and stakeholders being addressed and fits the needs of the commissioner. These well-fitting solutions tend to endure and are the types of communication that other practitioners will admire for their intuitive sense of rightness that leads to the question “why didn't I think of that?” In corporate communications, slogans such as BMW's “the ultimate driving machine” tagline is an example of fit between the piece of communication, the corporate brand, the product and the aims of the organisation, leading to the slogan enduring for over 40 years.

iv. Realisation of the programme

With characteristic logic, Christopher Alexander (1963, p. 84) stressed that “the starting point of analysis is the requirement. The end product of analysis is a program, which is a tree of set of requirements”. The programme as it appears in the diagram is clearly abstracted from the real situation of requirements, resources and constraints within which the individual planner or team are designing a communication solution. If the analysis and resulting programme are sound and based on rational communications design, the diagram should not only summarise but also contribute to the understanding the functional needs that brought it into being as well as the resources available for its realisation and the contextual constraints to which it had to respond. In this way, the finished plan or realisation is both a way of probing the nature of the context and also the practitioner’s best guess or hypothesis as to the optimal solution to the client requirements. As with all hypotheses, it has been derived through a combination of abstraction and invention, combined with deductive reasoning as the plan is worked through. Similarly, aspects of the hypothetic communications design will be rejected when misfit variables or discrepancies appear, giving evidence that the plan has failed to respond to a new force in the context. The intended output of rational communications design is clearly-conceived plans that are well adapted to their context and which meet the public relations requirements of the commissioner. The optimal adaptation takes place independently within independent subsets of variables that allows the communications problem to express itself in the process, leading to a rational programme for a campaign.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to respond to Galloway’s (2013) stimulus for reflection on public relations using philosophical ideas, while choosing a relatively narrow focus on design philosophy in order to make the result of some practical value. The conclusion is that the field of design philosophy, embracing architectural, engineering and product design fields, offers public relations practitioners and academics a broader perspective on the field and helps to cultivate a greater awareness of PR in relation to other areas of human life. In particular, the type of reflection encouraged in the methodological template for communications design can be used to think through and plan PR programmes in a rational, ethical and systematic way that enables individual practitioners to be true to themselves in the way they generate new programmes but also makes them more aware of the skills and knowledge they do not have and need to seek elsewhere.

Under the heading “How can we help practice?” Bettina Van Ruler (2017) provided a summary of a roundtable at the 2017 ICA conference in San Diego on the relationship between the academy and practice, reporting in the EUPRERA newsletter that “The discussion was very lively and we ended up with the (not completely definitive) answer that science can help practice to reflect on their everyday dilemmas in order to generate options for redefining their questions and from thereon find better answers.” It was with a similar emphasis on helping practice and encouraging reflection in order to generate better answers, that the ideas on a philosophy of communications design and the outline of the four-level conceptual hierarchy for PR planning offered here were developed. The intention of this article and the associated methodological template was both to help practitioners to reflect, to consider more options and as a result become more able to generate viable solutions in their work. Besides this practical aim, the intention was also to encourage further discussion on the possibilities of a synthesis between design philosophy and public relations, as well as inviting further work on developing the ideas outlined here and exploring the potential that the philosophy of design practice could deliver to the PR field.

The next step in terms of validation would be to confront a weakness in this paper and test the model widely in PR practice and undertake a study on its efficacy in use. Despite the deliberately conceptual nature of this introductory and exploratory article, the lack of engagement with practice to gain insight of the viability and feasibility of the approach offered here is a limitation at this stage. The place of creativity in public relations was acknowledged at the outset but deliberately not discussed at length here because of the focus on the philosophical aspects of communications design rather than any underlying creativity aspects. However, it is clear that these topics are tightly inter-connected and ripe for joint investigation and reflection in future work. Beyond these practically-oriented points for future work, the hope is that this article also provides an outline for future exploration of a fresh area for public relations research and education, namely the philosophical aspects of communications design in public relations.

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