

# Editing from the edge: De-territorializing public relations scholarship

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## Abstract

This article considers the neglected area of journal editorship in advancing a discipline and provides, albeit retrospectively, theoretical warrant for its *modus operandi*. Written from a specific personal, cultural, and geographic site, it charts the move of Australasian public relations writing from the periphery to the center through a series of editorial policies, principles, and practices. © 2005 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Growing public relations: from tree of knowledge to rhizomatic organization

While writing this piece, I encountered an innovative formulation of field development in relation to visual communication. The formulation, in Smith, Moriarty, Barbatsis, and Kenney's (2005) *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*, both confirms my practice retrospectively, and provides a theoretical justification for how strategic editing from the edge can assist in expanding public relations, and indeed any developing discipline. The *Handbook's* introductory chapter (Moriarty & Barbatsis, 2005), "From an Oak to a Stand of Aspen: Visual Communication Theory Mapped as Rhizome Analysis", attempts to map the visual communication field by adapting Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of a rhizomatic organization of knowledge instead of the conventional accounts of a tree or body of knowledge. One major attraction of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept as a metaphor for organizational practice is that it opens up multiple sources for new beginnings, since, in its botanical usage, a rhizome is an underground tuber that can produce new buds from anywhere in the system, and so has no apparent beginning or end. Their rhizome is therefore both dispersed and mobile as a network of connections across which things flow. As such, it opposes traditional arboreal systematizing notions of knowledge, which are based on the model of a tree, solidify in visible and immovable forms, have a singular origin event and source, and often come with a built-in teleology, as with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) evolutionary models of public relations.

The metaphorical shift from tree to rhizome helps distinguish different approaches. In the arboreal approach, for example, the Public Relations Society of America's Body of Knowledge project, which arose out of the U.S. experience, suggests an attempt at totalizing knowledge through a linear process that begins from establishing roots and carries through to the latest leaves. In the rhizomatic approach, significant new growth can come from anywhere in the system.

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From my perspective, I seek to offer a range of different regionally and/or theoretically based perspectives on public relations that facilitates plural lines of development that grow from different initiatives and/or lead in different directions and/or challenge existing organizations of knowledge beyond simple aggregation and without being restricted to places of origin or predetermined end points.

When the editors of this special issue asked me, as the longstanding editor of the *Australian Journal of Communication*, to submit an article for consideration, I was puzzled for a number of reasons: first, I am not in the field of public relations, although, before taking up my present position, I had taught corporate writing and editing to public relations students for many years in the School of Communication at the Queensland University of Technology, which had pioneered public relations education in Australian higher education; second, it is rare to ask editors to reflect on their contribution to a discipline, especially one that is not their own; and third, until they directed my attention to it, I had not realized the importance of editorial strategy to local aspirants in developing their field. Interestingly, almost contemporaneously, its importance as a general phenomenon has been identified by van den Meer (2004), who notes that scholarly publishing “is rarely examined as a global contributor to a field of research. But its value as a map to the evolution of a discipline is inestimable” (p. 172).

In relation to the third reason, the editors directed me to their recent cross-cultural review of 21st-century public relations for *The Review of Communication* (a journal of the U.S.-based National Communication Association), which sets out the vital role of non-U.S.-based journals for non-U.S.-based writers (McKie & Munshi, 2004). In seeking to compare and contrast public relations research in Australia, New Zealand, and the U.S., they confirm that local journal publishing is essential in enabling a relatively autonomous scholarly space for public relations research and writing from certain regions. Certainly, since its inception in 1976 by founding editor Rod Miller, the *Australian Journal of Communication*, the leading Australasian communication journal, has fostered distinctive—in geographical, political, and theoretical terms—communication scholarship. The journal’s mission reflects the statement in the 6th report of the Australian Universities Commission in May 1975: “one of the roles of a university in a free society is to be the conscience and critic of that society” (Karmel, 2000, p. 165). New Zealand has gone so far as to legislate that its universities “accept a role as critic and conscience of society” (Education Amendment Act, 1990).

After taking up the *Australian Journal of Communication*’s editorship in 1988, I intensified that mission by diligently setting out to enhance the journal’s critical stance and intellectual standing. These efforts were acknowledged in 1992 at the annual Modern Language Association convention in New York, when the Council of Editors of Learned Journals, a U.S.-based organization of editors of scholarly journals, awarded the *Australian Journal of Communication* an honorable mention in the annual Phoenix Award for significant editorial achievement. In their citations, the judges commented on the journal’s “lively set of articles . . . serious, rational, reflective”: “The articles in the new *AJC* are more theoretically and politically oriented, thus more interesting without being ponderous or self-consciously inflated”.

My consistent strategy has been to publish high-quality English-language scholarship in communication from Australia, New Zealand, and Asia, alongside some of the most influential communication scholarship from international theorists such as Lawrence Grossberg, James Carey, and James Anderson from the U.S. and Mica Nava, Graham Murdock, and John Corner from the U.K. This has been supplemented with theme issues in which communication scholars have collected and presented papers on Australian biographies, books and publishing, corporate communication, diversity and disability, environmental issues, health communication, information design, and intercultural communication.

In fostering writing from the field of public relations, the *Australian Journal of Communication* aims to reflect local ideas and foster local authors while locating that work within an international context. By 1997, the growing field in Australasia enabled me to commission a special issue, “Public Relations on the Edge”, devoted entirely to the discipline. That special issue placed leading local, European, and U.S. writers not only side by side, but also, in parts, in internal dialogue, as well as providing accounts (admittedly outsider accounts) of public relations in Malaysia (Botan & Taylor, 1997) and Papua New Guinea (Smyth, 1997). The combination of international and local is also present in the final issue of *AJC* for 2004, which featured world leaders George Cheney (2004) and Robert Heath (2004) alongside a range of New Zealand and Australian authors.

I have also encouraged material strongly critical of the whole project of public relations and its consequences. For example, political scientist Ian Ward, in a fascinating 2003 paper drawing on Deacon and Golding’s (1994) work on the emergence and institutionalization of a PR state, concludes that few Australian studies shed any light on the Australian PR state, though its broad contours seem clear enough.

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