



# Public relations as a strategic intelligence for the 21st century: Contexts, controversies, and challenges



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## ABSTRACT

This article features uncertainty as one of the dominant challenges facing society and, therefore, contemporary public relations. In looking for ways to better adapt and promote public relations to the service of fully functioning society, it revisits controversies around the notion of multiple intelligences (MIs), including emotional intelligence. It examines the stakes and status involved in claiming “ownership” of IQ or of promoting another “form” of intelligence(s). In addition, the article foregrounds the formative role played by promotional communication, especially in framing ideas and telling stories, to gain traction in academic communities and to gain acceptance among wider publics. Finally, it suggests that public relations is a disciple of strategic intelligence that could learn by adapting to, or adopting from, the growing range of subjects aspiring to be the next big intelligence. We suggest that such an adaptation has benefits: it might to better access knowledge with contemporary and future relevance rather than slowly consolidating a more insular Public Relations Body of Knowledge based on past results; it can improve the field’s impact and reputation by engaging public relations with cross-disciplinary controversies; and it can follow Gardner’s (2008) forward-looking view of the need for any discipline, or cluster of good intelligences, to be oriented to serving a global community.

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## 1. Contexts: contemporary life, uncertainty, and risk

Since at least John Kenneth Galbraith’s (1977) publication of *The Age of Uncertainty*, the notion of uncertainty was considered as an identifying characteristic of the late 20th century. Briefly disputed by Alan Greenspan’s (2008) nomination of the present as *The Age of Turbulence* in the 21st century, uncertainty remains a strong post-2000 contender. This is visible in two ways. The first is by the range and number of book titles, or subtitles, containing “age of uncertainty”: Weick and Sutcliffe’s (2007) *Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty*; Bauman’s (2007) *Living in an Age of Uncertainty*; Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons (2001) *Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*; and Broocks (2013) *Evidence for God in an Age of Uncertainty*.

Uncertainty’s claim to Zeitgeist properties is reinforced by the rise of “risk” as counterpart term for characterizing the present age. Risk supports uncertainty’s claims because the two terms are, as in Bammer and Smithson’s (2009) *Uncertainty and Risk* collection, so frequently linked. Risk owes much to its foregrounding by Ulrich Beck’s (1992) notion of risk society

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which is founded on the tensions of the uncertainties of risk. That alone was prominent enough to make risk a candidate for capturing a key essence of contemporary life – even Greenspan (2013) implicitly acknowledged this priority by inserting “Risk” rather than “Turbulence” into his later book title. Risk sharpens the edge of the notion of turbulence.

Despite these recent manifestations, it is useful to contextualize risk and uncertainty as ancient concerns at many levels. Both are central to the human condition and predictive of survival and societal viability at the most primitive (and contemporary) levels. Humans have long wondered about creation, what happens after death, and the problematics of daily life: from what sources of food can be readily obtained to how long will children (or parents) live? Such uncertainties, manifested by terrorism in this century, include the prospect of ideologically and psychologically motivated violence. These are a minute few of the uncertainties that couple the discipline of risk with matters of chance. (As in the case of *Divine Right of Kings*, the assumption was that by birth, survival, or military victory, God individually chose and empowered monarchs; ironically, herein occurred the great battle between church and state reconciled by at least one monarch who claimed to be both.) A world without predictability is too entropic for people to accommodate. Thus, among other conceptual/cognitive and language/symbolic tools are those available as narratives.

Giving grounding to this notion, Browning and Morris (2012) observed how, among other functions, narratives are the repositories of the events and arcs of human experience. Such conclusions can be as insightful and relevant for primitive minds as for those confronted with the uncertainties of the late modern, or “post-postmodern” (if we are there yet), conditions. Humans find it hard to tolerate randomness and chaos, no matter how much that is the nature of their world. They like, at least the illusion, of knowable patterns, predictability, and risk control. Early hunters told children hunting tales to improve the likelihood of their tribe continuing to obtain nourishment. Mothers and grandmothers told the “old wives tales” to maintain tried practices of personal and community health and safety.

Yet, as observed patterns and environments change, so must narratives. Gottschall (2012) convincingly argues that humans are “wired” for story to give us an evolutionary advantage because “stories help us navigate life’s complex social problems” and, “just as flight simulators prepare pilots for difficult situations,” storytelling “has evolved, like other behaviors, to ensure our survival” (Front flap).

Humans have to handle uncertainties that are the result of complex relationships and events. So that nations (as well as other collectives) can understand complex relationships and events, they create spies. They spy on one another since surveillance is a means for bringing at least some modicum of control to complexity. The activity presumes to assert linearity on a non-linear set of events. If spies, then counterspies, counter intelligence, and misinformation. If spies, and counter spies, then counter-counter spies. Such is the search for intelligence, patterns, predictions, certainty, probabilities, and other potential dysfunctions of the desire for control.

As such, patterns tend more toward variance and randomness than uncertainty—but within allowable limits before narrative completely overwhelms fact. In the movie, “Lonely are the Brave,” the character played by Walter Matthau marvels how each day and by the same sequence and times, a dog posts his scent on the same objects. So, he (we) come to believe there are patterns that reduce uncertainty to knowability and predictability. But, if we watch a roulette wheel, the same number has exactly the same odds of coming up at every spin of the wheel. Hierarchies and elites in societies become “lofty, honored, and even worshipped” because they come to know the change of seasons as not totally random. They can predict the narrative of planting and thereby seem gifted. And, by the same token, social movement activism seeks self-empowerment through spawned disorder, as is the current case with ISIS.

## 2. Approaching uncertainty and intelligence

Uncertainty is best defined as the absence of certainty. That claim is a seeming tautology, but suggests that people operate on limited knowledge both because of their lack of “intelligence” and due to the fact that complexity confounds human knowing—for an infinite number of reasons. Thus, uncertainty is a cousin of risk, and risk management is essentially the discipline of seeking to know but otherwise coping with the unknown, or the partially (and even badly), known. And battles are waged regarding whether (think of the precautionary principle) not approving a technology does least harm (such as in the case of genetically modified organisms) or failing to “take a risk” stops progress.

By demonstration of such paradoxes, it is possible to conceptualize and teach communication as a discipline fixated on uncertainty (e.g., Grant, 2007) and to explain human communication as individual and collective uncertainty reduction. Media presume that newsgathering reduces uncertainty about events and people. All theater, even comedy, plays on the drama of uncertainty, and its reduction. Interpersonal communication scholars presume that interaction rituals are used both to reduce uncertainty because it is uncomfortable—and to create uncertainty. Berger (1975) observed how and why uncertainty refers to “the number of possible alternative ways of behaving and believing when strangers meet” (p. 35). People have ample strategies for finding out, at least within the limits and powers of their own intelligence, about one another. They have infinite ways of explaining, and narrating, disorder and thereby giving it order; so argue the logics of attribution theory.

Social anthropologist Mary Douglas (1985) answered the question of how and why humans are capable of risk acceptability, partly because humans are capable of, and predisposed to, risk and blame (Douglas, 1992). She discovered how humans are variously at odds with one another over explanations designed to cope with uncertainty and risk. Interest in such matters both motivated and augmented Douglas’ interest in the role religion plays in the human condition. The certainty of some form of religion is based on the universality of uncertainty, and its discomfort as risk. By that logic, one can define

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