From humble inquiry to humble intelligence: Confronting wicked problems and augmenting public relations

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This study seeks to upgrade the concept of humble inquiry into humble intelligence (HI) to address a particular set of seemingly intractable challenges known as wicked problems. It locates the concept of wicked problems in the academic literature to underpin its argument that, because of their ubiquity within organizations and across communities, wicked problems have implications for the practice of PR. It suggests that many of PR's functional challenges within organizations can be characterised as "wicked," while the discipline's strategic interests suggest PR has a wider role to play in helping society address other "wicked" dilemmas. Despite these issues and opportunities the article identifies how PR has yet to recognize, let alone engage systematically with the challenges conceptualized as wicked problems. To confront them, the article sets out Schein's notion of humble inquiry and upgrades it to humble intelligence, loosely defined as a cluster of multiple and interacting capabilities that, in concert, forge a form of collective intelligence amongst a wide range of stakeholders. In this coalition, HI can harness the dispersed knowledge that exists in communities and organizations to go beyond traditional, hierarchical, and, often, isolated forms of expertise. This reorientation engages wicked problems productively by deploying multiple perspectives, extending networks, and building the social capital required for collaboration. The article concludes that as well as gaining traction on seemingly intractable challenges, HI both complements and adds value to dialogic theories of PR.

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1. Introduction

This study introduces a new form of intelligence and applies it to public relations (PR). It seeks to upgrade Schein's (2013) concept of humble inquiry into humble intelligence (HI) to address a particular set of seemingly intractable challenges known as wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The article argues that, because of their ubiquity within organizations and across communities, wicked problems have implications for PR. It further contends that many of PR's functional challenges within organizations can be characterised as "wicked" and addressing them as such aligns with the discipline's strategic interests. The article also argues that PR has a wider role to play in helping others in society tackle wicked problems (WPs).

Despite these issues and opportunities the article identifies how PR has yet to recognize, let alone engage systematically with the challenges conceptualized as wicked problems. To confront them, the article sets out Schein's (2013) notion of humble inquiry which is based on a form of "here-and-now humility" (p. 5) that recognises the interdependence of organizations

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as well as individuals. This concept is then developed and advanced as humble intelligence (HI), considered as a cluster of multiple and interacting capabilities that, in concert, forge a form of collective intelligence amongst a wide range of stakeholders. In this coalition, HI can harness the dispersed knowledge that exists in communities and organizations to go beyond traditional, hierarchal, and, often, isolated forms of expertise. This re-orientation engages wicked problems productively by deploying multiple perspectives, extending networks, and building the social capital required for collaboration.

HI's particular value to the field lies in articulating a set of capabilities useful to PR's functional role in organizations, as well as informing debates around the discipline's wider impact on society. HI generates a vocabulary and mindset capable of bridging the two different approaches. The traditional, dominant one focuses on understanding PR as a managerial practice, while the other is concerned with "the more-encompassing role of public relations in society" (Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2010; p. 671). This article locates humble intelligence at a point of intersection between these two perspectives and, therefore, offers important unifying potential, as well as practical relevance to the field.

The term wicked problem is used widely and has gained in popularity across a range of disciplines and sectors. The article situates the idea in its foundational literature to ground the term, provide a theoretical underpinning, and considers strategies associated with the resolution of WPs in other disciplines. These perspectives reinforce the relevance of the concept to PR while, at the same time, highlighting the field's lack of engagement on the subject. The article then presents humble intelligence as a way of engaging PR scholars and practitioners on the issues surrounding WPs. It suggest how, as well as gaining traction on seemingly intractable challenges, HI both complements and adds value to dialogic theories of PR.

2. What makes a problem wicked?

The term wicked problem was first referred to almost fifty years ago by C. West Churchman, a philosopher and systems scientist. He noted that Horst Rittel from the University of California's Architecture Department had suggested in a seminar that the term be used to classify a type of problem which is "ill-formulated", characterised by "confusing" information, as well as "thoroughly confusing" ramifications (Churchman, 1967; p. B-141). The adjective "wicked" was used to describe "the mischievous and even evil quality of these problems, where proposed "solutions" often turn out to be worse than the symptoms" (Churchman, 1967; p. B-141). It was Rittel and Webber (1973) who went on to develop the first systematic conceptualization of wicked problems. Their research was motivated by the realisation that many public policy challenges, such as those they encountered in urban planning, cannot be resolved by the application of a linear and rational approach to problem solving.

To illustrate their thinking Rittel and Webber (1973) developed a set of ten characteristics (highlighted in italics below) that differentiate WPs from difficult but ordinary problems. These have since been applied and contextualized to challenges in the private as well as public sector (Conklin, 2006). First, *there is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.* Rittel and Webber (1973) note this "*is the* problem" and the information required to understand the WP also depends on the "idea for *solving* it" (p. 161, italics in original). As Conklin (2006) highlights every solution that is offered merely serves to expose new aspects of the problem. Second, *wicked problems have a no stopping rule.* Although it may be possible to tell when you have reached a solution to an ordinary problem, "with a wicked problem, the search for solutions never stops" (Camillus, 2008; p. 101). They instead require on-going action and commitment. Indeed, the problem solving process ends only when those involved in the process have run out of resources, "such as time, money, or energy, not when some optimal or 'final and correct' solution emerges" (Conklin, 2006; p. 7).

The next characteristic of WPs is the *solutions are not true-or-false, but good or bad.* The individuals and groups involved in addressing the problem will have different views about what an acceptable solution might be. Determining a way forward is therefore not an objective process but a question of judgement. Solutions are therefore assessed in a social context where a range of stakeholders will bring a host of different perspectives, values and goals. Their fourth attribute is *there is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.* It is not possible to assess quickly whether or not a solution has been successful, while any attempt at resolution "will generate waves of consequences over an extended – virtually an unbounded – period of time" (Rittel & Webber, 1973; p. 163). This makes evaluating outcomes especially difficult.

Another attribute of WPs is that *every solution is a "one-shot operation"; because there is no opportunity to learn from trial-and-error, every attempt counts significantly.* This refers to the insight that all attempts at a solution leave a mark which cannot be reversed. They create consequences which, in turn, generate their own wicked problems. Furthermore, *wicked problems do not have an exhaustively describable set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into* the plan. Their enigmatic nature suggests a feast or famine in terms of solutions. A range of remedies may be possible, or not possible; considered, or not considered. According to Conklin (2006) this aspect calls for creativity to devise potential solutions, as well as judgement to determine those that should be developed and implemented in an attempt to tame the WP.

An additional characteristic is *every wicked problem is essentially unique.* Given a complex cocktail of factors and conditions no two wicked problems are ever the same. This means that off-the-shelf remedies are not appropriate and salvation instead lies in tailored, custom-made solutions. Even if applying the same solution looks promising, a change of situation or personnel might ensure that an identical set of initiatives will not generate the same positive results. Conklin (2006) notes that while over time it is possible to acquire wisdom and knowledge about different approaches you are "always a beginner in the specifics of a new wicked problem" (p. 8). This point leads on to their eighth feature which is *every wicked problem can be*