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## Public Relations Review



### Full Length Article

# A systematic review of 40 years of public relations evaluation and measurement research: Looking into the past, the present, and future

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#### ABSTRACT

The evaluation and measurement of public relations have been a lasting topic for academics since the 1970s. Over the course of time, much has been written upon the topic, but no standardized analysis of the large body of academic literature has been conducted. This study employs a systematic approach to explore the current state of knowledge through journal analysis of public relations evaluation and measurement research. A total of 324 journal articles, published from 1975 to 2015 in 12 selected journals from the field of public relations and communication management, have been systematically reviewed. The review examines what has been researched in the past, how the research is interrelated, and what still needs to be investigated in the future. This paper reports on the major topical, theoretical, and methodological trends over time, and derives a research agenda, concerning above all the need for a holistic theory of value creating communication and more sophisticated measurement approaches.

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## 1. Introduction

For more than 40 years, intensive discussions have taken place among practitioners working in the field of public relations (PR)/communication management on how to demonstrate the value of communication for businesses and organizations: How does communication contribute to organizational success? How can the impact and effectiveness of communication be measured?

The evaluation and measurement of public relations in the organization context have also been a perennial topic for scholars since the early beginnings of academic research in the field (Likely & Watson, 2013; Stacks & Michaelson, 2014). As long ago as 1987, Pavlik (p. 65) stated that “measuring the effectiveness of PR has proved almost as elusive as finding the Holy Grail.” As McElreath (1993, p. 302) reported, the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of public relations is an issue that “stands out from all the others, as it has for decades.” Ten years later, McCoy and Hargie (2003, p. 304) noticed that “probably the most common buzzwords in public relations in the last ten years have been evaluation and accountability.” Indeed, throughout the academic research, questions related to measurement and evaluation have been listed among the top research priorities of public relations scholarship (e.g., Synnott & McKie, 1997, p. 271; Watson, 2008, p. 111). However, despite extensive discussion, neither scholars nor practitioners have achieved consensus on how to explain convincingly

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how public relations add value to an organization and how to measure this contribution (Likely & Watson, 2013; Wright, Gaunt, Leggetter, Daniels, & Zeffass, 2009).

As measurement and evaluation research has been a lasting topic for PR scholars, with dedicated conferences such as the International Public Relations Research Conference (IPRRRC) and a dedicated Measurement Commission founded in 1997 under the umbrella of the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), a considerable body of literature has evolved over time (Watson, 2006). In light of today's extensive scholarly contributions, Lindenmann (2005, p. 8) lamented: "[...] the time has come to stop 'reinventing the wheel,' to take a serious look at what already exists and has already been accomplished, and build from there." In a similar way, Macnamara (2014a, p. 24) suggested "[...] that scholars need to examine their research in terms of impact and reflectively and reflexively consider what more can be done to connect theory to practice."

Until this day, however, no standardized analysis of the large body of academic literature within the evaluation and measurement domain has been conducted. The few existing literature reviews emphasized professional topics employing historical approaches; consequently, they were not devoted to systematically gathering the state of the art of PR evaluation and measurement research. Given this backdrop, there remains a need for consolidation and synthesis of the existing scholarly work.

To address this need, this article reports the findings of a large-scale project reviewing the public relations and communication management literature, guided by the following prime research question: What is the status quo of the academic discussion within measurement and evaluation research published in peer-reviewed journals? By systematically examining and synthesizing journal articles produced over a 40-year period, this article explores (a) what has been researched in the past, (b) how the research is interrelated, and (c) what still needs to be investigated in the future. This paper will provide a picture of the state of the art of evaluation and measurement research discussed in peer-reviewed journals and derive a research agenda to stimulate future inquiries.

## 2. Conceptual framework

The academic debate about the measurement and evaluation of public relations has a considerable history: while the first practices of PR measurement date back to the late eighteenth century, scholarly research and theorization began in the 1960s and made substantial progress throughout the 1970s (Likely & Watson, 2013; Macnamara, 2014a). A conference in 1977 at the University of Maryland chaired by James E. Grunig is considered to be the initial starting point of the US American debate, followed by the first scholarly special issue in the *Public Relations Review* in 1977 (Watson, 2012). In the 1980s, the academic journal discussion blossomed, stimulating a strong interest both in academia and in practice in the 1990s, which eventually resulted in the founding of proliferating practice initiatives, i.e. the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communications (AMEC) (Watson, 2012).

In Europe, the first fundamental consideration of PR measurement and evaluation can be traced back to 1996, when the Swedish Public Relations Association (SPRA) developed the first model of "return on communication," which conceptualized the creation of non-financial value through communication (SPRA, 1996). In the same year, a pan-European summit was held in Germany to discuss measurement and evaluation among German public relations counseling firms and consultancies (Lindenmann, 2005, pp. 5–6). It took, however, until the turn of the century for the research area to gain wider recognition in Europe (Zeffass, 2010, p. 948).

Looking back at 40 years of scholarly research and practice debate, a large number of articles, books, guidelines, toolkits, white papers, or conference reports have been published by scholars, practitioners, and PR associations (Lindenmann, 2005), with the largest collection of literature issued on the website of the IPR Measurement Commission (e.g., Carroll & Stacks, 2004). In view of the long and chequered history of PR measurement and evaluation research, a few scholars have attempted to outline the evolution of the research field from a historical perspective, using a narrative approach (e.g., Gregory & Watson, 2008; Likely & Watson, 2013; Lindenmann, 2005; Macnamara, 2014a; Watson, 2012). Among the seminal contributions are such often-cited works by i.e. Watson and Noble (2014), Stacks and Michaelson (2014), Zeffass (2008, 2010), or Van Ruler, Tkalc Verčič and Verčič (2008). These publications provide a sound starting point for briefly mapping the debate in the form of a conceptual framework, which provides a broad overview of what has been discussed so far in the field of evaluation and measurement research. From this conceptual framework, specific research questions will be derived to guide the following systematic review (Torraco, 2005).

### 2.1. Key terms

To discuss the evaluation and measurement of public relations, scholars have introduced a plethora of terms, which have however remained largely unspecified (Macnamara, 2014a, p. 9). The key terms used in previous works include evaluation and measurement, effectiveness, value, and intangibles. According to a semantic network analysis of titles within public relations scholarship from 1975 to 2011, the terms "evaluation" and "value" were among the distinctive keywords in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas the term "effect" was among the most salient keywords in the 2000s (Kim, Choi, Reber, & Kim, 2014, pp. 117–118). Since then, the term "value" has become embedded in the language of public relations practice, as the Delphi study by Watson (2008) illustrated (Gregory & Watson, 2008, p. 341). The "value" of communication carries the two connotations "financial/tangible" and "non-financial/intangible," as opposed to the meaning of values as underlying cultural expectations or norms and beliefs (Stacks & Michaelson, 2014, p. 255). The popularity of the terms value and

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