The Playing Field of Sports Public Relations

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Communication
Friday, June 5, 2015
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)

Abstract 2015-085 8:30 AM
(Joliet)

Research Background
Due to sports’ high profile, intense public interest, and media attention, public relations plays an important role in the survival and successful operation of sport organizations in today’s competitive sport environment (Stoldt, Dittmore & Branvold, 2012). While there has been sport specific public relations research (e.g., Coombs & Osborne, 2012; Pratt, 2013; Ruihly & Fall, 2009), some (e.g., L’Etang 2006, 2013; Waters, 2013), argue that little attention has been paid to the topic of sports public relations within both grand disciplines of the field: public relations and sports management. An argument can be made that this is partly due to the lack of clarity in the field of public relations, such as an absence of a universally agreed definition and theoretical underpinnings, its changing nature, and a lack of a well-articulated field boundary (Greenwood, 2010; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). As a result, it might not be surprising that public relations has oft wrestled with its epistemological and ontological nature (Brown, 2012). This study, therefore, seeks to contribute to the building of clarity to the multi-disciplined field of sport public relations, a field that has struggled to find its niche both academically and in practice (Hopwood, Skinner, & Kitchin, 2010; L’Etang, 2007, 2005). This will be addressed through a review of the existing works from both academic and practitioner literature.

Research Objectives
The study seeks to i) present the current state and historical evolution of sport public relations literature, (ii) its theoretical underpinnings, and iii) compare and contrast the field from an academic and practitioner viewpoint.

Research Method
Data collection: A comprehensive review of the literature is being conducted using multiple sources. In the first phase, a query is being undertaken using academic search engines commonly used in social sciences, namely Academic Search (Ebsco Publishing), Google Scholar, Scopus (Elsevier), SportDiscus (SIRC), and Web of Science (Thomson Reuters). To ensure no articles were neglected, and trade articles not associated with academic databases were included; reviews of academic and trade journals in public relations and sports management are also being searched. The keyword descriptors being used in a sport context include: public relations, organizational relationships, reputation, issues management, public affairs, corporate communications, stakeholder relations, risk communication, corporate social responsibility, corporate identity, corporate branding, corporate reputation, stakeholder communication, media relations, community relations, employee relations, investor relations, donor relations, government and regulatory relations, managerial communication, strategic communication, key publics, relationship evaluation, crisis management and sport marketing public relations.

The keyword descriptors were determined from four sources. The first from L’Etang’s (2013b, p. 800) definition of public relations. Her inclusion of corporate communications in that definition led to the addition of key words from the “foundational” chapters of corporate communications from author Joep Cornelissen’s book (2014). In acknowledgement of the uniqueness sport (Chalip, 2006) and sport public relations (L’Etang, 2013), key words from how sport organizations use public relations (Stoldt, Dittmore & Branvold, 2012, p. v) were also included as well as words from their definition of sport public relations (p. 2). Hopwood, Kitchin, & Skinner’s (2010) book entitled, Sport Public Relations and Communication, also contributed key words as it frames sport public relations as a response to crisis, stating (p. 4), “organizations doing the right thing at the right time” and introduces the term sport marketing public relations.
Data Analysis
The goal of any literature review is to assess the range of definitional, conceptual/theoretical, and operational similarities/differences within a field (Jones & Gatrell 2014). According to Jones and Gatrell (2004), literature reviews are “essential for making sense of existing scholarship and to identify new research directions” (p. 251). Moreover, Cooper (1982) states that a critical objective of an “integrative review is to summarize the accumulated state of knowledge concerning the relation(s) of interest and to highlight important issues that research has left unresolved” (p. 292). Consequently, we followed the guidance of Das (2008) and developed a rigorous multi-step integrated literature review process. Articles were then classified and categorized using Heath’s public relations typology (2010, p. 1-4) of “management adjustive, discourse engagement and normative/critical/ethical.” Heath’s typology was chosen because of its understandability and its allowance for approaches outside organizational derived frameworks and cross-paradigmatic schools of thought (Motion, Davenport & Merlot, 2013). In addition, as public relations typologies continue to evolve, his represents the latest philosophy.

As both public relations and sport management are applied social sciences, practitioner participation through trade journals was deemed important. In public relations, it is appropriate and perhaps desirable to capitalize on the experience of both scholars and practitioners (Pavlik, 1987). Scholars understand the theories and principles that enhance performance in the field, but may not fully comprehend the day-to-day realities of the practice (Wakefield & Watson, 2014). However, professionals, immersed in the daily challenges of their work, often do not grasp the theoretical principles behind effective practice. Thus recognizing the strengths and weakness of these two sources, a combination of scholarly opinions and daily experiences is the best way to develop useful theories for future practice (Wakefield & Watson, 2014).

Research Contribution
This is a work in progress. Once completed, the study will empirically present and critique the field of sports public relations and its theoretical underpinnings, using a sport perspective to help contribute to the debate among public relations scholars regarding the dominant symmetrical/systems approach versus more critical world-views (Greenwood, 2010). It will help identity if in a sport context, if there have been changes in the organization-public (stakeholder) relationship, changes suggested by some as needed (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2010; Taylor, 2010) to test public relations theory and allow challenges by newer perspectives “so as not to close off other ideas or stultify thinking” (Gower, 2006, p. 178).

Specifically, a model will be built and presented at NASSM. The constructed model will seek to conceive the big picture of sports public relations research by compartmentalizing and connecting the interrelationships among the different segments, contexts, and areas of its research components. The model will help to navigate the body of knowledge of the field, and overall, comprehend the scholarship in a manner that is understandable and meaningful.