A critical historiography of public relations in Canada
Rethinking an ahistorical symmetry

Amy Thurlow

Introduction
Public relations as an emerging profession (Lages & Simkin, 2003) has been criticized as atheoretical in its approach (Brown, 2006; Grunig & White, 1992). Critics contend that public relations is a discipline currently lacking “paradigmatic and topic diversity and strongly influenced by practice” (Lages & Simkin, 2003: 298). Over the past three decades, public relations scholars have endeavoured to develop discipline-specific theories that represent a theoretically based body of knowledge representative of a scholarly profession. This process has been defined by excellence theory, introduced by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Excellence theory is a normative theory that prescribes how to do public relations in an ideal situation (Pompper, 2004). This theory articulates an evolution of public relations from asymmetrical (focused on organizational goals and one-way communication) to symmetrical (respecting both organizational goals and those of other stakeholders) two-way communication. Since its inception, excellence theory has dominated the public relations landscape, embedding with it a corresponding historical narrative which moves public relations from asymmetrical to symmetrical over a period of the past 100 years or so. The historical narrative which supports this theory attempts to construct a linear history which is singularly American, corporate, and characterized by the experiences of high-profile (mostly male) practitioners of the twentieth century (Miller, 2000). Lamme and Russell (2010) describe the approach of excellence theory as a 'periodization approach' which sets up a linear progression from ‘worst’ to ‘best’ practices. This chapter calls, in broad terms, for increased research outside this dominant paradigm.

A perspective of critical historiography (Jarzombek, 1999; Durepos & Mills, 2012) suggests that our knowledge of public relations has been defined by a dominant theoretical/historical narrative which is at once self-producing and isolationist in its approach. Although much of the current research on public relations is concerned with either excellence theory or the lack of alternative theoretical work, the attention to the impact of a lack of historical scholarship in this area is a more recent and less fully explored area. Brown (2006: 206) asserts that the “idea of public relations, once regarded as a-theoretical, is actually more a-historical.” He illustrates that what has been critiqued as a lack of diversity in theory and history is actually reflective of a “writing out” (Cooke, 1999) of historically relevant material in deference to the dominant
narrative. Although Cooke’s analysis focused largely on the field of change management, his contention was that managerialist and organizational histories have produced a “historiographical shaping effect” (Cooke, 1999: 81) which has led to the construction of organizational theory as a political process.

It is important for public relations scholars to understand our knowing of the history of Canadian public relations as a historiographic process which privileges some events as significant, and by definition, writes others out. As Jenkins (1991: 17) tells us, ‘history is never for itself. It is always for someone.’ In this sense, the ways in which understandings of public relations, or any historical understandings, are assembled through the writing of a history reveal elements of power, privilege, and the shaping of knowledge (Cooke, 1999: 83).

From a perspective of critical historiography it is the lack of awareness of this process and the resulting power effects on theorizing and understandings of the profession which require further study. The historical narrative which currently defines the evolution of public relations in Canada, and arguably around the globe, has had a significant impact on processes of theorizing and theory development within the profession. “The withdrawal from historical scholarship has not only diminished our consciousness of public relations. Leaving history out of public relations research weakens our confidence in theory. Public relations is a social institution, and for historical sociology, it is axiomatic that sociological explanation is necessarily historical” (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992: 838).

This necessary relationship between theory and history has not been widely acknowledged within public relations scholarship. The epistemological and ontological frames which are constructed through a history shape our ways of theorizing within the field. As Somers (1998: 722) asserts, “theory cannot escape history and both misunderstands itself and introduces potential distortions into its work if it tries to do so”. Essentially, all theory must be grounded in history (Brown, 2006).

Beyond the field of public relations, there has been a growing call across management and organization studies for an historically informed approach to critical management studies in broader terms (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006). As management and organization scholars continue to call for an historic turn, public relations researchers may be able to apply this approach and understanding of the importance of knowledge production within and about this field.

The overreliance on excellence theory and symmetry has not only limited the possibilities of theorizing from other perspectives within the profession, it has also “caused and resulted in historical distortions … and ethical oversimplifications like the dissociation of public relations from propaganda” (Brown, 2006: 206). Although excellence theory and the history of public relations which supports it provide one way of knowing the field of public relations, the dominant nature of this knowledge has eclipsed other histories to the extent that a very narrow understanding of the field prevails. This history is almost exclusively concerned with an American corporate orientation (Miller, 2000). Histories of the study and practice of public relations in Canada, for example, have not been well documented or understood. Thus, the Canadian experience of public relations and opportunities for theoretical development as a result of this, have been very limited.

Responding to the limited scope of public relations history in the mainstream literature, Lamme and Russell (2010) call for a new theory of public relations history. Their work outlines some of the limitations imposed on dominant narratives of public relations history by American domination of the field, the influence of the role of propaganda in the emergence of public communication disciplines, and the role of business interests in the establishment of models of PR. Their study of public relations practice prior to the traditional starting point of the dominant narrative “removed the imprint of the traditional timeline” (Lamme & Russell,
2010: 357) within this narrative and introduced possibilities of pluralized histories illuminating the emergence of public relations.

**The dominant narrative**

The prevailing historical narrative offers an Americanized, twentieth-century model of corporate public relations (Miller, 2000). This narrative is developed around a construct of the progressive evolution of the profession from unethical to ethical practice, represented in a move away from propaganda towards strategic, socially responsible communication. The origins of this narrative are not definitively known, but Hoy, Raaz & Wehmeier (2007) speculate that the author may have been Edward Bernays (a ‘father’ of American public relations) who began writing on the history of the field as early as the 1930s. By now, however, the narrative has been so widely used and reproduced so frequently that it is virtually undisputed and established within the public relations literature.

The dominant theoretical perspective in public relations is excellence theory (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Grunig and Hunt define excellent public relations as “part of the management of communication between an organisation and its publics” (1984: 7). This definition is consistent with the managerialist approach reflected in excellence theory and its corresponding models of public relations practice. Drawing on systems theory, excellence theory was developed out of a study of best practices in public relations funded by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) and led by James Grunig. This study established benchmarks for excellence in public relations practice and presented an understanding of public relations as moving through four models of public relations: press agentry/publicist; public information; two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric (Grunig & Hunt, 1984: 22). This evolution of symmetry as a term that represents a more sophisticated and enlightened form of public relations where interests of both organizations and other stakeholders are considered equally remains the gold standard for excellence within the profession. Deatherage and Hazleton (1998: 71) point out that “[t]he assumption that asymmetrical and symmetrical worldviews influence the selection of models and consequently the effectiveness of public relations is central to Grunig’s (1992) theory of public relations excellence.” However, they further contend that there has been no empirical research in the literature that confirms the existence of such worldviews, or links them to public relations practices.

Excellence theory presents an evolution to symmetrical communication as an historical process, moving current public relations practice away from its ethically questionable origins in the early 1900s. This dominant history follows the development of PR through the First and Second World Wars where propaganda was a prominent aspect of the discipline. Post-Second World War the symmetry model reflects an approach of cleansing the public relations from its propaganda past and moving towards strategic communication management, a term which is used within excellence theory to reflect strategic communication resulting in mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and publics.

Brown (2006) disputes this history, asserting that this theoretical/historical narrative was constructed in the absence of scholarship about the history of public relations. The history which supports the symmetry model, he contends, is a distortion of history and theorizing within the field.

These distortions have advantages in the classroom: they offer undergraduates a historically linear, ethically justified, technologically oriented explanation of public relations. The cost, however, has been the marginalization of the actual history, art and culture of the subject at hand.

*(Brown, 2006: 210)*
As post-secondary institutions set out to teach the history of PR in their introductory courses, a narrative of the profession began to emerge. This process began to unfold, for the most part, in the post-Second World War era, and with the growth of university courses came a demand for textbooks on the subject. Although textbooks did serve to solidify disciplinary knowledge, particularly around accepted practices, through their structure they also served to shape and normalize existing knowledge and present it as truth (Smyth, 2001).

The public relations histories developed in academic textbooks offer consistent accounts as they maintain an ethically and technically progressive progress of PR development in history, a development from manipulative beginnings to symmetric communication (Hoy, Raaz & Wehmeier, 2007: 198). Also worth noting, public relations education which occurred at this time took place almost exclusively in the United States. Although some courses were available in other countries, the United States was the source of virtually all textbooks and documentation on the evolution of public relations, and remains so today. Recent scholarship now indicates that although leading textbooks in the field of public relations let us assume that the practice of public relations was invented in the USA (Hoy, Raaz & Wehmeier, 2007), there is much evidence that indicates the presence of other stories (L’Etang, 2006). These histories have been largely eclipsed by a narrative defined within an American timeline.

For the most part, distinctly Canadian histories have not been established for public relations. In their place, the Americanized history of public relations, widely exported around the world, has been adopted and reproduced in concert with the establishment of excellence theory. This hegemonic effect on knowledge of public relations is described by Rodriguez Salcedo (2012: 332):

“Until very recently, the prevalence of US-based and published monograph studies and research articles on the history of PR has required scholars to teach such works as standard, and has framed PR as a profession from a similarly American perspective.”

The immediate challenge for researchers attempting to analyse Canadian histories of PR from within textbooks is that there are no Canadian foundational PR textbooks in circulation. Although much discussion has percolated on this topic among Canadian academics and publishers there are no Canadian textbooks available that document any histories of public relations in Canada. As a result, Canadian public relations students are most often exposed to American histories of the industry, supplemented at times by Canadian articles or accounts of the discipline. Thus, the dominant figures who characterize historical public relations practice in Canada are Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays, American “fathers of public relations” (Colf, 2007; Hiebert, 1966).

A Canadian narrative

Although not widely available, preliminary scholarship on the historical Canadian experience indicates public relations had its origins in efforts of public policy and government administration, largely aimed at immigration and settlement campaigns.

Emms’ (1995) research on the history of Canadian public relations traces the first full-time publicity activities to the general immigration campaign of the late 1800s. After Confederation in 1867, the growth and development of Canada became a priority for the new government. Incentives of land grants and free passage across the Atlantic were widely advertised in an effort to convince European farmers to seek a new life in the Canadian West. In 1896, Wilfrid Laurier became Prime Minister of Canada and brought with him a renewed commitment to improving the communications strategies employed to recruit settlers and sell the West. To lead this strategic communication campaign, Laurier appointed Cliford Sifton as Minister of the Interior, the
portfolio responsible for immigration and western settlement. Norman David of the Canadian Encyclopedia identifies Sifton’s work in promotion “as a model in communications, targeted to specific audiences, and it probably represents the greatest and most successful public relations campaign in Canadian history” (David, 2011).

To further his efforts at recruitment, Sifton incorporated a number of public relations tactics and strategies into his campaign. These included familiar tools of modern public relations practice such as media tours, lectures, advertising, and special events. However, he was employed primarily as a government official and it is quite likely that Sifton did not consider himself a public relations practitioner. That being said, the term public relations itself was not well used at this time. The term public relations counsellor was coined in 1923 by Edward Bernays in the United States and represents the first incidence of individuals practicing public relations being ‘named’. Throughout the early 1900s and up until the mid-1920s in Canada, government communication and publicity campaigns were by far the most significant and most common of what would become identified as public relations practice. During this era, Canadian railways began to emerge as important corporate actors within the expansion of the Canadian west. The railways also adopted public relations strategies to promote travel, and along with a small number of other private companies began to introduce full-time corporate publicity programs by the early 1900s (Johansen, 2001: 59).

Although public relations practice was growing, it was not until about 40 years later that the Canadian experience included formalized public relations education. In 1948, Leonard Knott introduced a course in public relations at McGill University, Montreal. Knott was a founding member of the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) in Montreal, and the author of The PR in Profit, published in 1955. The University of Toronto’s public relations course soon followed in 1949. Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax became the first university in Canada to offer a Bachelor of Public Relations degree programme in 1977. These educational programmes were supported by the establishment of professional associations in Canada, namely the CPRS and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). While little is available in the literature in terms of documenting this educational experience, Wright (2011) has highlighted differences between the Canadian and American experiences of public relations education. These include such differences as where post-secondary programmes were located, i.e. university versus community college programmes, the time-frame of expansion of public relations education, and the location of the programmes within faculties. For example, whereas the American programmes were often located within schools of journalism, this was not the case in Canada where programmes tended to be located within schools of business or as a stand-alone unit. Wright (2011: 236) also points to a number of “factual inaccuracies” that frequently surface in mainstream accounts of the evolution of PR education, calling for further research into the evolution of PR education in North America.

Through an examination of a PR history from a Canadian perspective, the impact of geography, public policy, and the early settlement patterns of Canadians can be seen to influence both the evolution and the practices of PR. As the field developed over the following decades, differences in focus and professional development are also evident. By moving away from the dominant focus of a corporate model of public relations, the Canadian experience of public policy development and related communication initiatives offers a new lens through which to view histories of theory and practice.

Theoretical perspective

As a theoretical framework, the approach of critical historiography offers a retrospective and critical approach, responding in part to what McKie and Munshi (2007) define as a need for a plurality of epistemological perspectives within our knowledge of public relations.
A critical historiography is not history, “but rather a critique that simulates history in order to expose the imperative of closure” (Jarzombek, 1999: 203). As Durepos and Mills (2012) explain, this type of analysis does not contest that events occurred in the past, or advocate that the past is to be denied. The focus of the analysis is to critique “depictions of the past as stable, already assembled, unchanging, closed, and done, prior to our efforts to assemble it (and after our efforts in assembling it for that matter)” (Durepos & Mills, 2012: 710).

Problematising symmetry as both a model of public relations and a historical timeline of PR development is central to the analysis of how histories are written, produced, reproduced, and understood within a Canadian context. This perspective also facilitates an investigation of the relationship between history and theory within public relations and the ways in which these elements exist in tension with each other as they define the field.

Consistent with what Booth and Rowlinson (2006) describe as a reorientationalist agenda, this study contributes to a call for a critique of both the ahistorical nature of existing theories and the atheoretical character of much of historical analysis. Within this theoretical framework, the written histories of the pioneers represent a way of writing history that is mediated by powerful ontological and epistemological influences (Munslow, 2010). The shaping effects of language, voice, ideology, perspective, and context in the broadest sense all contribute to and influence the retrospective writing of these historical accounts (Mills, Weatherbee & Durepos, 2013). From that perspective, these written histories are not presented to contest the ‘truth’ of a dominant narrative, but more so to establish alternative histories and create space for pluralized ways of knowing public relations as a profession, a practice, and a scholarly discipline.

**Method**

Using an historiographically-informed approach of critical discourse analysis, the written histories of Canadian public relations pioneers are analysed to surface emergent themes. These themes are further investigated to explore the construction of narratives which reflect a Canadian history of public relations.

Critical discourse analysis has been employed as a method compatible with a theoretical approach of critical historiography in organizational studies (e.g. Flowerdew, 2012) and provides a natural tool through which to engage ideas of power, pluralized histories, and discourse in a retrospective analysis of an emerging profession. Arens (1998), in her work on sémanalyse, an “analysis that critiques the social space and subjectivity produced by the language shared within a community,” (1998: 23) introduces critical discourse analysis as a tool of analysis in an historical investigation of feminist texts. She advocates critical discourse analysis as an appropriate method “based on the premise that language and consciousness are intertwined in social practice, and must be subject to a general historical critique of subjectivity” (Arens, 1998: 23).

In this study, critical discourse analysis offers a method uniquely suited to the analysis of issues of power and language in the crafting of histories of public relations. The texts analysed in this study comprise the *Jack Yocom Public Relations Profile Collection*, named for one of the pioneers. This collection is produced by the Communication and Public Relations Foundation, a recognized, not-for-profit, charitable organization committed to increasing public knowledge and awareness of the role of public relations which was established in 1979. The CPRS, Canada’s only professional association dedicated specifically to the public relations profession, contributes to the funding of the collection. These 17 profiles of Canadian public relations pioneers are presented as a collection on the Foundation page of the CPRS website (www.CPRS.ca). This series reflects interviews with the featured individuals and comments from their colleagues and peers within the PR industry.
A close reading of the texts provided the foundation for coding of the data and the identification of emergent themes from within the text. The specific approach to critical discourse analysis employed in this research incorporates the work of van Dijk (1993) and Phillips and Hardy (2002) to apply a critical focus in the investigation of language and discourse present in the text. From this perspective, signposts were established to facilitate coding within the text and to surface language that most explicitly reflected issues of power, theoretical perspectives, and historical frames.

In the first phase of analysis, the text was coded with particular attention to the interplay between text and context, most notably the ways in which elements of language and power were privileged in the context of their production. The second phase of the analysis was a coding of text which reflected the use of power, privilege, and access to discourse which informed broader knowledge/power relationships. The text was further interrogated to surface inconsistencies, ironies, or contradictions, and to highlight language that silenced other perspectives, knowledge, or histories.

The themes which emerged through this process were further analyzed to investigate the historical frames, or the connections made to histories, used by the pioneers to construct their own histories of public relations in Canada. The signposts described above assisted the research process by ensuring that analysis of the text would be conducted within an historically sensitive and critically informed manner.

**Analysis**

The profiles featured in the Jack Yocum Collection are introduced on the CPRS website and described in the following way:

Currently, there are no recorded profiles of Canadian public relations practitioners. Some are listed in the Canadian Who’s Who. Others can be found on the Order of Canada website. Some may have been the subject of a magazine or periodical article but, generally, there is no systematic collection of the lives and accomplishments of Canadian public relations practitioners who have made significant and extended contributions to the practice.

This collection of profiles, that will include several phases, will provide a consistent method of recording the history of public relations in Canada through the personalities who have developed and influenced the practice. The collection is named in memory of John H. “Jack” Yocum who died in February, 2003.

In the case of those practitioners who have died, colleagues have been interviewed to discuss the individual’s impact on the profession. Other practitioners who have been profiled have been interviewed using a standard set of pre-determined questions prepared by the College of Fellows, Canadian Public Relations Society.

(http://www.cprs.ca/foundation/yocom.aspx)

The introductory text which sets up the collection does not problematize the process of “writing” histories. As such, the histories are presented as ‘the’ history of public relations in Canada as told by those who produced it. This collection of profiles is said to “provide a consistent method of recording the history of public relations in Canada through the personalities who have developed and influenced the practice.” This articulation of history implies one linear historical path that is ‘done’ and documented through this series. Again, the method of writing is described as a “standard set of pre-determined questions” almost as if to preserve the consistent, scientific assembly of this “history of public relations in Canada”. In this introduction the text serves to at once legitimize the construct of a fixed and factual history, while inviting individuals to contribute their personal experiences within that narrow historical context.
Notwithstanding the approach described above, a critical reading of the histories themselves reveals narratives that are not consistent in that they reflect some aspects of a common, historical experience or their contradiction of dominant historical and theoretical knowledge. Although excellence theory and the American corporate narrative are certainly present in the stories of the pioneers, there is diversity in the ways in which this influence is represented. In addition to themes of symmetry and excellence, themes of ethical practice, Americanization and encroachment were also present.

**Excellence theory/symmetry**

One of the most prominent themes that emerged from the text was that of excellence theory and the symmetry model. The language reflected in this theme was represented in terminology such as strategic communication, objectives, and mutually beneficial relationships. Consistent with the dominant narrative, the pioneers referred to elements of Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) models of public relations practice as a linear historical frame, describing early public relations as propaganda, or at least one-way and not strategic, and contemporary practice as enlightened and symmetrical.

Within this theme, language emerged to support a theoretical/historical relationship which came to define “excellent public relations.” At the same time, contradictions were present in the text which indicated that although practitioners were aware of what excellence should look like, that model was not always what was valued in their practice. As a result, a sub-theme of asymmetry was identified.

Two-way symmetrical communication was described by most pioneers in language that reflected either strategy (strategic communication which incorporated goals and objectives of organizations and stakeholders) or mutually beneficial relationships. As strategy, pioneers referenced an evolution from “seat of the pants” to “more strategic and thought out” public relations practice. In the early stages of their careers, pioneers, describe an environment defined by “putting out fires.”

The evolutionary process pioneers describe as they move along the path to symmetrical, strategic communication, emphasizes that they become more involved in the organizational decision-making process and therefore able to influence senior decision-makers to adopt a more symmetrical approach. The location within the organizational structure is an important indicator of the evolution of the profession. As one pioneer describes:

> In the job interview, I was told I would report directly to the CEO which is the right reporting relationship for PR, but when I started, I was assigned to someone else whose only interest seemed to be making me speak French. I came home from that first day and said to my wife, ‘Don’t unpack; we won’t be here long.’

Nevertheless, in contrast to this narrative of evolution from asymmetry to symmetry, organizational interests do emerge as paramount when pioneers describe their greatest career accomplishments. The following quote highlights the disconnect between the description of public relations as evolved into a symmetrical model, while the practitioners themselves continued to value the organizational objectives over those of other stakeholder groups. One pioneer describes a career highlight as “defeating the Innu and about 100 plus engaged supporters they’d aligned over some years, from the major faiths to unions and foreign activist groups”. This ‘defeat’ of activists organized against organizational (in this case government) interests was offered as proof of effective and excellent communication management.
Another pioneer employs language of a battle or conflict in describing his reaction to “losing” in a disagreement on how to proceed between management and board members, “I had/have never ‘lost’ a crisis/issues battle/assignment. It’s like being a lawyer with a lot of court experience losing a case for the first time.” This polarization in the narrative, defining a win-lose experience as the antithesis of symmetry, which is defined in the literature as establishing “mutually beneficial relationships” (Cutlip, 1994) for organizations and their stakeholders.

In another contradiction to the theoretical narrative, the texts here reflected at least some resistance to incorporating theory too fully into practice:

In the immediate post-war era, the subject was taught from American textbooks, with more emphasis on the theoretical than the practical. We persuaded the academics to see the value in teaching the profession with case studies that are recent and relevant to public relations. I enlisted the support of veteran practitioners to give guest lectures to students, and to give practical examples of case assignments they had managed.

This tension between theory and relevance is evidenced throughout the pioneer histories as individuals make sense of their own experiences in context of the more ‘sophisticated’ symmetrical communication.

**Ethical practice**

The struggle to be seen as, and actually be, an ethical public relations practitioner emerges as an important theme in every pioneer history in this study. As demonstrated in the dominant narrative, pioneers frame an historical progression from unethical to ethical practice as a defining characteristic of the evolution of Canadian public relations. Nevertheless, contradictions are present in the text around this point. One pioneer describes an event that stands out in his career where he had to “smooth over” an incident that would have damaged relationships in an international partnership. When two Canadian air force pilots flew into restricted Italian airspace, “we concocted a story about their instrument panel not working properly and apologized. They bought it, or pretended to, but it always bothered me. I think it’s important for PR people to be honest and accurate; otherwise your credibility comes into question.” Although the pioneer reflects on the actions as unethical, and troubling, the situation was not resolved in a manner consistent with a two-way symmetrical approach.

As well, several pioneers reflected with a kind of nostalgia about the old days where ethics were not at the forefront of practice.

When I started, PR was seen as the ‘pay for play’ field, the fun thing to do: wine and dine journalists and plant stories; trade on goodwill and good relationships to get good stories placed in print, on radio or TV and wire services, and in major magazines. That was our universe. For most, strategic communications planning in the deepest sense was not understood or used; our goal used to be to figure out what we should do to spend the budget we’re asking for that looks most productive and helpful.

**Professionalism**

In contrast, other pioneers reflected on the need for professionalism in public relations. As one pioneer states, “When I talk to new people entering the profession I tell them, your reputation
is all you have. Public relations is about trust and professionalism.” This professionalism was most often described in connection with education or licensing from an association. When asked to speculate on the future of PR, one pioneer stated, “the most important change for those in PR will be the demand for higher and higher degrees of professionalism.” Another commented, “We are not a profession and won’t be until there is some form of licensing and accountability, which we don’t yet have.”

Distinct from this position of requiring education or licensing, there was a parallel story of what ‘really matters’ in public relations practice. As noteworthy as the statements in support of professionalism was a lack of acknowledgement of the role of theory in informing scholarship and practice. Theory was not identified as central to the profession; it was seen as something ‘done’ at universities, not relevant to practice. And within this perspective is embedded a message that the basic practice of PR has not actually changed over time.

As one pioneer described:

The development of a structured training program has brought with it over the years a practice based on new themes. This training is now steeped in university vocabulary. But while people may not have talked about ‘communications orientations’ in the old days, every project they undertook was based on the famous RACE (Research, Analysis, Communication, Evaluation) formula. It’s no less relevant today.

This scepticism of “university vocabulary” echoes the previous theme, where the pioneers both recognized the importance of theory and education in the narrative, but struggled to reconcile their own preference for “seat of the pants” on the job training.

Americanization

The power of the dominant American corporate narrative of public relations was evidenced in the histories of the pioneers. Most often, the references invoked language which set up a relationship where the American model represented the standard to be achieved, and Canadians were in a “catch up” mode. This language was very specifically defined by some pioneers, even to the point of attaching an historical timeframe.

This perspective is illustrated in the comments of one pioneer who says “[i]n the 1950s and 1960s in Canada, the public relations function was about 25 years behind the United States.” In another reference it is stated “[b]ut during the Second World War, we made great progress … (towards catching up to the US).” The progress was defined by a boom in employment of public relations practitioners during the war as the government hired communicators to develop public information programs and “they informed the public about what was happening by developing, for instance, Victory Loan campaigns.”

As one history indicates, this work gave public relations a higher profile. “In addition to daily wartime newspaper coverage by reporters and editors, numerous well known newspapermen worked for the armed forces public relations units, and other government departments.”

This definition of public relations as ‘catching-up’ during the war parallels the American narrative presented in most commonly used textbooks. During the Second World War employment in the PR field exploded, and the profession gained a higher profile. At the same time, the relationships between public relations and propaganda became more central and increasingly problematic to understandings of public relations theory and practice.
**Differentiation**

Carving out a space for public relations within other management disciplines has been a central theme in the literature. As Smith (2012: 838) points out, “Public relations scholarship has long been weighed down by a singular challenge: to differentiate the discipline from related areas – marketing, advertising, and organizational communication, to name a few.”

Consistent with this perspective, concern with both defining themselves as public relations practitioners and earning respect from other disciplines emerged as an important narrative within the pioneer histories. All but one of the pioneers had entered the profession through journalism and media. As one pioneer stated:

> Back then most PR people were former journalists. Their strengths were that they knew everyone in the media business in terms of getting placement of a story or an article. Today, that doesn’t hold true … There is a need to differentiate public relations scholarship from other related communication disciplines like marketing, advertising, and communication studies.

Many of the pioneers assert that they “learned the ropes in sales, marketing and advertising” before moving into a PR role. But at the same time there is a strong feeling that they “always had been doing PR back then but it wasn’t called that then”.

The concern with encroachment expressed in the narratives focused most often on frustration in the reporting structures for public relations within organizations.

Many of today’s public relations departments are reporting through marketing. Having public relations departments or agencies reporting to marketing is not ideal. There is an immediate bias to present only good or sales oriented news. The public relations department is most effective in its role when it is a standalone department and not associated with marketing, or sales or legal, though the latter should be consulted as their input can be vital in many situations.

At the same time, when itemizing accomplishments of a public relations career for one pioneer, recognition within a marketing journal was considered a highlight. “In an August 2008 issue of Marketing, she was proclaimed as one of the 10 most influential pioneers in Canadian marketing history.” The respect and acknowledgement of the related disciplines was featured as an important aspect of a process of public relations establishing its own credibility as a profession.

Within the dominant narratives of public relations history, the evolution of public relations from an un-named or differently-named profession to a distinctly public relations discipline is identified as occurring in the 1920s and 1930s. The pioneer histories analysed in this study appear to indicate that although the term public relations is recognized by other disciplines, there still exists a struggle to define the field itself as distinct and separate from related fields. Likewise, the pressure to ensure that public relations is respected within the process of organizational decision-making remains.

**Discussion**

The written histories of the pioneers reflect the influence of a dominant theory and a corresponding history which have served to define understandings of public relations. Equally important, these texts reveal examples of dissonance between the histories crafted by Canadian
practitioners and the dominant theoretical/historical narrative. These spaces contrasting the Canadian and dominant narratives have yet to be fully explored, and may offer valuable insights into how practitioners and scholars come to see themselves and their discipline. As the dominant theoretical/historical narrative of public relations remains largely uncontested within the field, limited space exists for the exploration of alternative understandings of what public relations is, or has been, or can be.

The language of symmetry present in these histories indicates that there are some terms or figures of speech that hold a great deal of influence in the sensemaking processes of practitioners and educators. The terminology around the symmetry model appears as a filter in this process, lending plausibility to those accounts that most closely followed the model. As the pioneers reflect on their experiences, language around an evolutionary process and an acknowledgement of the need for strategy and mutually beneficial relationships emerged. On a broader scale, McLaren, Mills, and Durepos (2009: 399) suggest that “we need to examine more closely the development of tropes that serve as dominant filters for management knowledge or, more accurately, what is to count as management ‘knowledge’.” This study suggests that the trope of symmetry, constituted within excellence theory, in the construction of public relations knowledge represents one such dominant filter. In this role as gatekeeper, symmetry serves to limit diverse understandings of both histories and identities of public relations.

In the texts analysed above, the language of strategic communication was enacted frequently to convey a progression from a “seat-of-the-pants” past to a strategic present. Strategic communication is identified in the use of the RACE model, an approach of two-way symmetrical communication, and the organizational requirement to report to a CEO or senior decision-maker. This language and the narrative it constructs runs in contrast to examples provided by individual practitioners of their career highlights and greatest achievements. In several examples practitioners cited career highlights marked by events that were successful, yet not strategic.

The language of ethics was also prevalent in the histories, and conveyed a progression from an unethical practice to an ethical practice as an historical evolution. In contrast, several pioneers provided examples of career highlights including actions or events that were decidedly unethical. In one case, these actions were reflected upon as troubling and acknowledged as unethical. In others, they were celebrated as successful or, at least, unavoidable. There was certainly a sense that public relations practitioners ought to act ethically; at the same time there was evidence and discussion in the text that indicated unethical practice is still condoned within the profession if it is enacted to protect organizational interests.

**Conclusion**

This tension between understandings of the profession, what is known and what is valued, and the dominant theoretical/historical narrative has contributed to inconsistency in understandings of what constitutes ‘excellent’ public relations. Perhaps contributing to a fragmentation within the public relations identity which exists today (Thurlow, 2009), a lack of acknowledgement of different histories has resulted in dissonance between the dominant narrative and the lived experiences of the pioneers.

There remains much work to be done in unravelling the relationship between public relations practitioners’ understandings of who they are and the historiography that contributes to the production of this identity. As Lamme and Russell (2010: 356) point out “simply put, no area of public relations history has been adequately researched”. Equally important, the ways in which this historical research is written will influence, constrain, or enable alternative representations of historical experiences and meanings. Future research is essential to expand understandings of the.
origins and development of the field of public relations, and to enable possibilities of theorizing that have so far been constrained within a dominant frame.

This chapter contributes to the development of more pluralized and diverse histories of public relations, working towards a more complete understanding of theorizing within the discipline. Constrained by a lack of scholarship on the relationship between theory and history within public relations, alternative narratives of the evolution of public relations have been written out of the mainstream literature. Further study is required to surface these alternative narratives and give voice to different ways of knowing public relations. In this way, scholars may challenge the Americanized, twentieth-century corporate orientation (Miller, 2000) which dominates the field’s history (Lamme & Russell, 2010: 357).

This historiographical work is essential to expanding and supporting theorizing and theory development within the discipline. Further research in this area will contribute to the call for more historicized research within public relations, including the need for acknowledgement of pluralized histories and diverse approaches to documenting these. Within the Canadian context alternative histories must be identified, explored, and ‘written in’ to create space for a more robust understanding of how public relations scholars and practitioners come to know themselves and their profession; past, present, and future.

References

This page intentionally left blank