

What's Next?

The Relationship of Public Relations to Management, Journalism and Society

BY JAMES E. LUKASZEWSKI, ABC, APR, FELLOW PRSA

John Naisbitt, one of the world's foremost futurists, lays out a series of thought platforms, or mind-sets, about the future in his newest book, "Mind-Set! Reset Your Thinking and See the Future." The first mind-set is, "While many things change, most things remain constant."

In a subtitle to this topic, Naisbitt says, "In a 24/7 media world, the hype is change." This thought seems to be a pretty good indicator of the issues the PR profession is going to face in the next generation — much more of the same, but at different velocities.

If one looks at the PR profession today, in the context of its most crucial issues from the past generation, it's clear that our past problems and opportunities are substantial indicators of what's going to occur in the future. To paraphrase Naisbitt, history is sometimes a good reflector of future conditions.

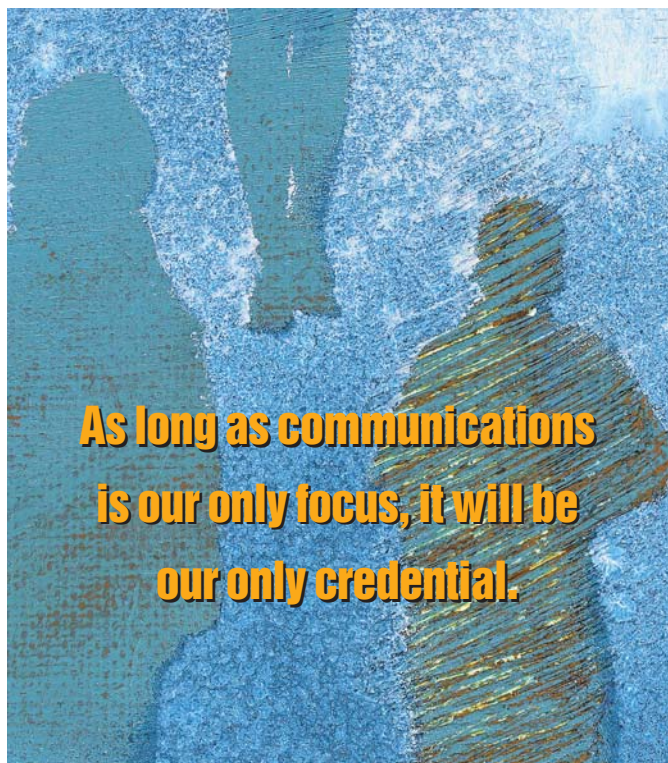
In that spirit, and licensed by the empiricism so prevalent in our profession, it seems there are at least three major areas where change would be desirable: the profession's relationship to management, journalism and society. The level and degree to which each of these

will change may be determined by the amount of hype around them.

There are many possible topics. My selection is based on three criteria:

1. Likelihood of continuing importance
2. Impact on the profession
3. Prospect of continuing collateral damage in the absence of positive and useful change

As mentioned on Page 5, PRSA will start celebrating its 60th anniversary this June. So I wrote this article for a few reasons: I am even older than the Society, and I have some perspective on the history of our profession, along with some bruises and accomplishments collected along the way. These qualify me to polish my crystal ball and make some prognostications. But let me caution the read-



er against characterizing these thoughts as futurisms. Rather, take these as the thoughts of a seasoned hand trying to look forward constructively.

Relationship to management

I often ask audiences of practitioners I speak to, "How many of you watch the series 'The West Wing?'" Usually quite a few hands go up. I then ask who their fa-

vorite character in the series happens to be. With a few exceptions, most cite C.J. Cregg, the female press secretary to the fictional president Josiah "Jed" Bartlet. When asked why, the audience recognizes attributes such as courage, high-spiritedness, intelligence, forcefulness and similar accolades. But then I ask another question: "Why do you admire someone who is lied to, put upon and thrown to the wolves . . . like most of you are every day? Does she do her job better than you do yours?" There are often a few laughs, but also some thoughtful looks.

My next question is, "How many of you see yourself as someone at the table, advising the boss, guiding, steering and counseling?" Almost all hands shoot up immediately. Clearly, that's not where C.J. Cregg was. Where is the disconnect?

I suggest to the audience that they go back and watch reruns of "The West Wing," but this time, instead of watching C.J. Cregg, they watch Leo McGarry — the president's chief of staff — literally one office away from the president. He actually was frequently at the table all by himself.

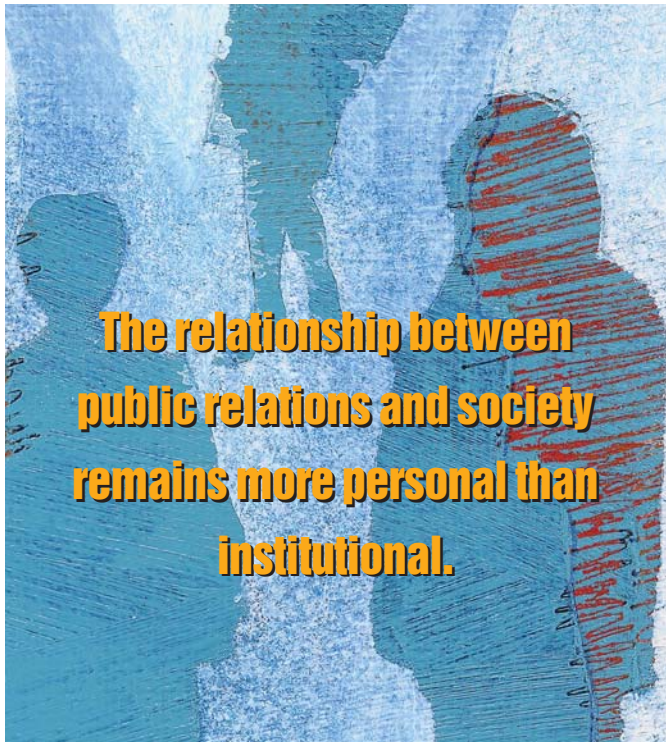
This story illustrates the biggest issue facing public relations. We want to be at the table, steering and guiding, but always and only through the lens of communications. As long as communications is our only focus, it will be our only credential. The professionals I've met over the decades, after becoming managers, assume that they are good communicators. They rarely call for our help until it's either too late or they know what they want to say and simply want us to say it for them.

Our participation in the executive suite requires a powerful continuing evolution in management thinking in four areas:

1. Developing a management mind-set where communications is but one component.
2. Bringing management information they don't already know or have.
3. Recognizing that today's manager, at every level, lives in a world that is measured in some way, daily or sometimes continuously. Anything that can't be put in metrics is generally discarded or disregarded, unless the boss counts on it.
4. Being reliable. Can the boss count on you to help with what he or she has to do next?

Relationship to journalism

My contention here may anger some colleagues, but



we must move further away from journalism as the sole reason for our existence. All too often, clients ask me to help them clarify whether the paycheck of a practitioner they employ comes from them or the local television station or newspaper. We continue to view communications in its own, often journalistically dominated, context. Our bosses have a different view and different expectations.

Reporters matter, and so do the mediums they represent, but communication techniques and technologies continue to explode. The world keeps moving in a direction where everyone has the ability to broadcast, transmit and act as reporters outside any formal structure of journalism. PR practitioners, often driven by clients, need to be fluent and aggressively strategic in these new communication arenas.

From another perspective, PR programs in colleges and universities are by and large integral parts of journalism departments. While an academically interesting pairing in the professional world, outside the university setting it is an absolute conflict of interest. This conflict is felt daily in executive offices across the country. At a minimum, PR programs belong in marketing sequences rather than journalism sequences. At most, they ought to be more a part of business education and training programs. Human resources, security and finance are all building solid relationships with major business schools. Public relations needs to

move in this direction with greater urgency. The sooner we can reflect a more managementlike perspective, the more quickly we'll find ourselves called in for our advice and counsel.

The profession's relationship to society

The relationship between public relations and society remains more personal than institutional. PRSA continuously finds it challenging to speak for the profession as a whole because we collectively represent an extraordinary variety of interests, activities, norms and expectations. If public relations is to speak on its own behalf to American society, it will probably require the services of some high-profile, credible, independently centered individual or group whose credentials are unassailable. The most feasible way for the profession to have a relationship with society will be on a practitioner-by-practitioner or client-to-client basis, as is currently practiced.

In some respects, it may be analogous to public opinions about Congress. "I vote for the candidate who represents me because he or she is committed and really helpful. It's OK with me if the rest of them get replaced once in a while."

One current issue on the horizon that could certainly affect public relations' relationship to society is the ever-increasing requirement for authorship disclosure. The recent video news release brouhaha and PR-driven articles placed in the foreign press about American involvement in Iraq are a few current examples. Public relations is a predominantly anonymous function in communications, only rarely surfacing. Escalating demands for the sources of content could have a great impact on our profession. It may turn out that significant participation by communicators will have to become, as a matter of custom, identified and attributed. This could assure the credibility of information presented or, at a minimum, give some level of culpability or responsibility for that information. ■

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James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, is a specialist in helping clients deal with sensitive situations including litigation communications and reputation management. He has an international practice and teaches crisis management strategy at New York University. Details: www.e911.com.