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Research Proposal

"Is the relationship between Ireland's newspapers and its public relations consultancies a vital and a mutually beneficial one?"

The genesis for the question proposed is threefold: the emphasis on media relations both in PR textbooks and practice; the lack of material, scholarly or otherwise, on the nexus between media and PR in Ireland; and an interest provoked by the interview of a working regional news journalist with a PR qualification.

Of the academic PR textbooks reviewed (Anthony Davis, 2007; L'Etang, 2008; Morris & Goldsworthy, 2012; Swann, 2014; Tench & Yeomans, 2006), all devote at least one chapter to 'media' or 'media relations'. There is disagreement as to the relative importance of media relations with Morris and Goldsworthy (2012) narrowly defining PR as working "primarily through the use of media relations and other forms of third-party endorsement" (p. 6) and stating their belief that "media relations remains the core skill of public relations" (p. 251).

The textbooks in use, and case studies therein, are primarily U.S. or U.K.-centred. In the U.K. the scholarly and popular output on the research topic is high. L'Etang (2004) has authored a twentieth century history of professional PR practice in Britain that includes a chapter addressing the intersection of media and PR. The subtitle of the Aeron Davis (2002) work, in which he attempts to answer questions such as the influence of expanding PR on news production, is 'Politics, Public Relations and the Mass Media in Britain'. The McNair (2004) essay in *Journalism Studies* looks at the British relationship through the lens of 'spin'. At the populist end of the spectrum are exposés like *Flat Earth News* from Davies (2009) and PR-critical articles such as those from Greenslade (2012, 2014) in *The Guardian*.

There appears to be little or no scholarly research on the Irish relationship. However such a relationship patently exists. A cursory review of award-winning PR campaigns on the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) website (Prca.ie, 2014) shows that most, if not all, leaned heavily on print and broadcast media in their communications strategies, and cite positive coverage as a primary measure of success. Many Irish PR practitioners, responding to a magazine question about the

nature of PR (Casey, 2014), mentioned media, even if sometimes only to de-emphasise its importance: "PR is still focused largely on media relations … "; "PR is not merely about publicity, promotions, events, lobbying or newspaper articles … ". The conclusion is that research on the Irish dimension is overdue. The question as stated limits 'media' to the newspaper industry that has undergone retrenchment in recent years as PR firms have expanded in number and size. It further restricts 'public relations' to consultancies because, by their nature, they can testify to a broader range of experiences with a variety of clients. The underlying theoretical assumption is that the Irish newspaper-PR relationship is one of continuing interdependence i.e. is 'vital', and the intent of the research would be to validate this; further to provide insight into its status by documenting reported strengths and weaknesses; and finally to draw some inferences as to what, if anything, might bolster the relationship to the benefit of current and future professionals.

In considering research methods, focus groups were dismissed as impractical. Participant observation, while not ruled out, is not presently contemplated. The decision was made to employ a mix of positivist and interpretivist paradigms by using both quantitative and qualitative research elements; more specifically the choice was to use questionnaire and semi-structured interview methods. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) note that a 'mixed method' approach to research is often mentioned in the context of combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The aim is to promote validity through methods triangulation i.e. the use of multiple research methods to study a phenomenon. Denzin (1970) lists four forms of triangulation with methodological being the most commonly understood meaning. Here the concern is with the between-method rather than within-method approach.

The advantages (Surrey.ac.uk, n.d.a) of questionnaires include that significant amounts of data can be collected from a number of people quickly and cost-effectively; that results can be easily and quickly quantified through software; and that data can be analysed more objectively than with other forms of research.

The intent would be to generate two questionnaires - one for journalists, one for PR practitioners - and distribute them via email or online survey service. Some questions would be common to both even if phrased differently. A set of highly structured questions would be provided in which response options are predetermined and coded in order to provide some baseline understanding of the working relationship. With the research objective in mind the questions would be formulated based on review of relevant studies in the U.K. and elsewhere; and would possibly draw on the expertise of known former journalists and PR consultants. Reliability would be

enhanced through the use of a split-half or other approach; validity by ensuring a sufficiently representative sample with research-relevant questions. In addition to providing data for analysis it is hoped that responses would provide the starting point for an interview guide. The intent would be to send a large number of requests to participate to regional and national journalists and editors; and to PR practitioners both inside and outside the capital. Follow up contact would be initiated after a reasonable interval. The purpose of the survey would be clearly described, and confidentiality and anonymity guaranteed.

The disadvantages (Surrey.ac.uk, n.d.a) of questionnaires include the argument that they are inadequate to understanding behaviour, feelings etc.; that phenomenologists believe quantitative research is an artificial creation asking for limited information without explanation; that there is no way to measure respondent truthfulness and diligence; and that there is an unacknowledged level of subjectivity in differing interpretations of a given question. For these reasons, and to promote validity through a multi-method approach, a number of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews are also proposed.

The qualitative research interview is defined by Kvale as "an interview, whose purpose is to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena" (1983, p.174). Semi-structured, or focused, interviews, were chosen over tightly structured to allow for a series of open-ended questions based on the research topic. Since the search is for common themes it is important that all interviewees are asked the same questions (Strath.ac.uk, n.d.), in this case from a pre-prepared guide. The advantages (Surrey.ac.uk, n.d.b) of the semi-structured format include providing an opportunity for both interviewee and interviewer to address certain topics in more detail; allowing for prompting if more information is required or if the response is of particular interest; and freeing the researcher to follow a new line of inquiry. Face-to-face interviews, while involving increased time and cost, are preferred over telephone or internet (Opdenakker, 2006) because they can take advantage of social cues such as voice, body language etc., and there is no appreciable time delay between question and answer thus allowing for direct reaction and more spontaneity. However the interviewer must ensure all questions are answered at a sufficient level of depth within the fixed time available. The intent is to maximise descriptive and interpretive validity, as described by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011), by collecting information that is accurate and pertains to the topic; by recording each interview (with permission) and supplementing with written notes; and by contrasting and comparing. Time and resources will ultimately determine the number of interviews

carried out (Strath.ac.uk, n.d.) but the aim, in order to obtain a range of quality information, would be to interview one working national journalist, one regional journalist and two PR practitioners - one in a larger Dublin consultancy and one in a smaller firm in Cork or elsewhere. A national newspaper editor might be preferable if a higher level of interaction with PR practitioners was indicated; on regional papers many reporters tend to be involved in editing and day-to-day operations.

It would be reasonable to suggest that the research question posed be further constricted. Such fine-tuning may suggest itself from further review of relevant studies, from analysis of initial questionnaire responses, or perhaps from a limited preliminary survey with a select subset of participants. Newspapers could be further subdivided into national and regional; there might be a distinct and useful dynamic in regional newspapers in that those journalists often have, by necessity, multiple roles. The research may ultimately focus on a more specific aspect of the relationship. However, absent an extant body of work with an Irish context, the concern would be about over-narrowing at the outset. The assumption is that a broader view of a previously undocumented relationship might be useful, and prove instructive in a) determining if there are constructs that are uniquely Irish and b) identifying productive topics for in-depth study. Trochim (2006), in discussing the trade of detail for generalizability, notes that while generalising is straightforward in most quantitative research, it is a more complex task with qualitative research such as interview detail, and that is why there is value in mixing the two - the quantitative to reach generalisations based on analysis, the quantitative to provide the rich detail. Whether the research outcomes will be generalizable to Irish media beyond newspapers, and to PR outside of consultancies, is as yet unclear; the extent to which the Irish experience mirrors the British should become better understood.

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