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# Understanding Relationality:
# A Challenge for Religion Communicators

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***Abstract:***

Religion communicators in the United States face a conceptual challenge. Is their mission to sell a product, shape public opinion, package and distribute information, or manage interactions with social groups? These missions assume fundamentally different understandings of relationality. How do faith groups understand relationships? Are they based on community or some other set of attributes? If relationships relate to community, is that community based on shared belief or creation? Which view of community best fosters relationships that encourage cooperation and discourage polarization? The answers guide how faith groups value dialogue, respond to disagreements and understand public relations. This paper uses a hermeneutical approach and results from surveys of U.S. religion communicators and faith group leaders to suggest answers to those questions. The goal is to consider how religion communicators and faith group leaders understand public relations, how communicators approach their work and how they rate their skills for dealing with conflicts.

***Keywords:*** Faith Groups; Interfaith Dialogue; Public Relations; Relationality; Religion Communicators

***Résumé:***

Les communicateurs de religion aux États-Unis font face à un défi conceptuel. Est-ce que leur but est de vendre un produit, de modeler l'opinion publique, d'emballer et de distribuer de l'information ou de faire la gestion des interactions avec des groupes sociaux? Ces buts pourvoient des compréhensions de la rationalité de façons fondamentalement différentes. Comment les groupes confessionnels comprennent-ils les relations? Est-ce qu'ils sont basés sur la communauté ou un autre groupe d'attributs? Si les relations sont liées à la communauté, cette communauté est-elle basée sur des croyances communes ou la création? Quelle perception de communauté est à l'affût des relations qui encouragent la coopération et qui décourage la polarisation? Les réponses dirigent la façon dont les groupes confessionnels valorisent le dialogue, répondent aux divergences d'opinions et comprennent les relations publiques. Cet article utilise une approche herméneutique ainsi que les résultats de sondages auprès de communicateurs religieux aux États-Unis et les chefs de groupes confessionnels afin d'offrir des réponses à ces questions. L'objectif est de considérer la façon dont les communicateurs religieux et les chefs de groupes confessionnels comprennent les relations publiques, comment les communicateurs abordent-ils leur travail et comment jugent-ils leurs habilités de faire face à des conflits.

***Mots-clés:*** Groupes Confessionnels; Dialogue Interreligieux; Relations Publiques; Rationalité; Communicateur de Religion

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Church infighting has been common within the Christian movement since New Testament days. In the early 21st century United States, Christian denominational leaders have often sought to transform conflict-ridden church social systems into reconciled communities of believers (White, 2009). In resolving conflicts, faith group leaders confront two distinct concepts of relationality—or how people are connected to one another. One is based on community consensus. The other is grounded in the human family created by God. Recognizing the difference is important for conflict resolution and approaches to public relations for faith communities.

This paper suggests that harmony and consensus should not be primary goals when religion communicators respond to conflicts between individuals or groups. Consensus is a weak foundation for relationships. Simple disagreements can disrupt such weak connections. Strong relationships come instead from seeing all people as members of God's family. Ties that bind individuals are inherent aspects God's creation and cannot be broken. Such strong relationships can tolerate differences of opinion and thrive on dialogue. Robust dialogue promotes intellectual and spiritual growth. This paper calls the weak version of relationality a "community of belief" (Sliffe, 2004) and the strong version a "community in creation".

A community-in-creation perspective will require public relations practitioners for faith groups to change how they understand what they do. A 2006-07 survey of religion communicators in the United States finds they are more concerned with consensus than family connections (Cannon, in press). That orientation may limit the effectiveness of those communicators in interreligious and intercultural dialogues, especially in an interactive Web 2.0 environment. The rise of social media in the last decade has dramatically altered how organizations interact with stakeholders compared to practices during the late 20th century. The emerging online communication dynamic reflects strong relationality and makes a community-in-creation perspective in religion public relations more urgent.

To present a case for strong relationality, this paper will consider: 1) functional definitions and roles of public relations within organizations, 2) the emerging focus on relationships and meaning co-creation in public relations scholarship, 3) communitarian vs. liberal approaches to public relations, 4) relationality reflected in four excellence theory models of public relations (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002), and 5) survey results showing how members of the Religion Communicators Council in the United States describe public relations (Cannon, In press).

**Functional Definitions of Public Relations**

The interfaith Religion Communicators Council, founded in 1929, is the oldest public relations professional organization in the United States. Throughout the council's eight-decade history, members have debated exactly how they should approach their work. Are religion communicators to promote programs, package and distribute information, sell a product, shape public opinion, or manage interactions with social groups? The questions illustrate a key conceptual division among council members about their primary role: reporter or promoter (Cannon, 2009). Some members, such as Ralph Stoody (1959), known in the 1950s as the dean of religious public relations (Dugan, Nannes & Stross, 1979), contended that religion communicators should see themselves as in-house journalists and not the "hidden persuaders" vilified by Vance Packard (1957). Others saw themselves selling the faith (Cannon, 2009). Tilson (2009) detailed many recent activities by religion public relations practitioners that moved beyond both functional visions. These activities involved more than providing information to publics or influencing public opinion. Practitioners worked to foster intercultural dialogue and defuse community tensions.

Questions about what religion communicators should do have mirrored a broader debate in the American business and academic worlds about what public relations is and does. Harlow (1976; 1977) found 472 different definitions or metaphors for public relations in various sources from the 1920s through the 1960s. Harlow noted that definitions in the 1920s and 1930s tended to focus on publicity and propaganda. Definitions in the 1940s and 1950s talked about guiding social conduct, engineering consent, motivating behaviour, and shaping public opinion. Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) said a seemingly infinite number of public relations definitions reflected "the muddled thinking about the field" (1988: 11).

More confusion emerged in the 1980s as marketing scholars began redefining their discipline to include business functions traditionally associated with public relations. Besides dealing with products, price, placement and promotion, marketers said they should be managing relationships with organizational stakeholders: government officials, activist groups, employees, and investors. Public relations had traditionally considered those relationships part of its domain (Hutton, 2001; 2010). Edelman (2011) said marketers continued to claim expanded responsibility for organizational-public relationships in what business scholars called "Marketing 3.0".

At the same time, U.S. corporations have fragmented public relations activities. Some human resources departments have taken over employee communication. Chief financial officers have assumed responsibilities for investor relations. Legal departments have begun handling legislative and government relations. Marketing departments have started dealing with product publicity, consumer relations and customer relations. Outside public relations agencies are often hired for emergency/crisis communication. Corporate communication departments have been left with responsibilities for general publicity, media relations and community relations. As public relations areas have lost many non-promotional functions, the remaining duties have become hard to distinguish from marketing (Hutton, 2001; 2010). By the early 21st century many popular communication gurus, such as Breakenridge (2008), Breakenridge and DeLoughry (2003), Ries (2002), Scott (2007), Solis and Breakenridge (2009) and Weiner (2006), had equated public relations almost solely with product publicity. They said the practice was part of a business' marketing mix. The purpose was to promote product or service sales, not improve an organization's goodwill or build its reputation with key stakeholders as a good corporate citizen. The functional fragmentation and confusion with marketing have further muddled thinking about public relations' organizational role.

Authors writing for readers in U.S. Christian churches reflected the conceptual confusion. By the last decade of the 20th century, books about church communication, promotion and membership growth began equating marketing with evangelism (Barna, 1992; 1998; Moore, 1994; Nissen & Horswill-Johnston, 2001; 2006; Shawchuck, Kotler, Wreen & Rath, 1992; Twitchell, 2007). The sixth edition of the Religion Communicators Council's handbook for church communication, published in 2000, defined public relations as an element of marketing (Bushkofsky, 2000). In 2004, however, the seventh edition associated public relations with "strategic communication" and "relationship management" (Tilson, 2004: 85). Hutton (2010) reported ongoing research that had found moderate-to-strong public resistance to treating students, medical patients and members of religious organizations as "customers". That finding has implications for those who see faith as a product to be sold.

## Relationships and Meaning Co-creation in Public Relations Scholarship

Most public relations definitions reflect a functional approach. Communication is an instrument to accomplish organizational goals with a public. Public relations focuses on persuasion and influencing public opinion. The public being influenced is a means to an end (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Organizational-public connections are based on consensus (community of belief) and, therefore, weak relationality.

A second approach to public relations thought emerged in the 1980s. That co-creational approach looked at how organizations and publics mutually contributed to shared message meanings through ongoing interactions or relationships (Botan & Taylor, 2004). Co-creational scholars saw public relations' role as establishing and maintaining relationships or harmony between organizations and key social groups (Ehling, 1992; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001). The emphasis on establishing relationships and maintaining harmony continued to reflect weak relationality.

Ferguson (1984) issued the initial call for a shift in scholarship from functional topics to an examination of relationships as the primary unit of analysis (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Hutton (1999) identified "managing strategic relationships" as the central organizing principle of modern public relations practice. Grunig (1992; 2006) echoed that idea in his work on excellence public relations theory. He described public relations as a strategic management function regulating interdependency between organizations and constituencies, not just a collection of technical operations such as messaging, publicity and media relations. He said public relations practice should foster quality, long-term relationships between an organization and its strategic constituencies (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). But Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) noted that public relations literature seldom defined “relationships” or described how to measure them. A survey of public relations textbooks and academic journals found “relationship” was used as a primitive term. The same was true in literature from interpersonal communication, psychotherapy, and systems analysis. Hutton (2001; 2010) noted, however, that Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) had overlooked a wealth of scholarship on relationships in marketing literature.

One approach to theory building in co-creational thinking is based on communitarianism (Leeper, 1986; Leeper, 2001). Communitarianism uses hermeneutical techniques to construct truth. Hermeneutics involves interpretation and understanding of texts. A hermeneutist sees human interaction as one such text and humans as self-interpreting beings (Taylor, 1985) firmly planted in a social, cultural and historical context. Individuals are studied in that context (public sphere) to see how they interact and develop shared values and meanings. (Leeper, 2001; Richardson & Fowers, 1998).

The community-in-creation perspective reflects communitarian thinking. Furthermore, communitarianism is theologically consistent with views of creation in most faith groups, especially the Abrahamic religions. Community is a fundamental concept in those groups.

**Communitarianism vs. Liberalism in Public Relations Scholarship**

Communitarianism is a minority approach in public relations scholarship. Liberalism, the dominant view, reflects the “modern Western mindset” (Smith, 1982). The mindset is based on empiricism and naturalism. Research relies on reductionism and abstraction. All things are explained in terms of components separated from their contexts. Investigators use deductive techniques to discover universal truths and rules. Humans are seen as isolated (atomized) individuals acting in their own self-interest and competing with others (Leeper, 2001; Richardson & Fowers, 1998; Slife, 2004; Smith, 1982).

Since the late 1990s, many public relations scholars have used liberal deductive techniques to isolate and describe discrete, measurable relationship variables. Researchers in interpersonal communication, psychotherapy, and systems analysis identified at least six relationship attributes: subjective perceptions of participants about interactions, intimacy, trust, control, interdependence, and linkages (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997). Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) outlined five antecedents and three consequences of organizational-public relationships. Antecedents (social and cultural norms, collective perceptions and expectations, need for resources, perceptions of uncertain environment, and legal/voluntary necessity) explained why organizations entered relationships with specific publics. Consequences (goal achievement, dependency/loss of autonomy, and routine and institutionalized behavior) described what each party hoped to get out of the connections. Based on Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997), Grunig and Huang (2000) identified three stages of relationship formation (situational antecedents, maintenance strategies, and relationship outcomes) and suggested ways to measure each step.

Bruning and Ledingham (1999) identified three types of organizational-public relationships: professional, personal, and community. These relationships included multiple dimensions (trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment) and indicated that organizations had more than transactional business connections with stakeholders. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) posited that building relationships with publics involved two steps: 1) an organization's intentional focus on connecting with key publics and 2) communication with those groups about programs or activities that foster connections. The scholars showed that a planned publicity campaign through mass media could strengthen customer commitment to use a service (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

Hung (2005) said organization-public relationships arose when the parties were interdependent and needed to manage the consequence of that interconnection. After reviewing some 40 academic studies of organizational-public relationships, Ki and Shin (2005) said the most common attributes in those relationships were satisfaction, commitment, trust, mutual understanding, control mutuality (the power balance between parties in a relationship), and benefits. Hung (2007) contended that trying to measure relationship outcomes was not adequate for public relations management. Instead, she suggested measuring relationship cultivation strategies because ties were not static and did not develop linearly. Organizations and publics were in constant dialogue and usually had contradictory expectations about their interactions. The dialectic interplay provided the social dynamic that drove how all parties to a relationship coped with the push and pull of interaction.

In 2010 the Public Relations Society of America developed a Customer Relationship Index as part of its Business Case for Public Relations. Relationship indicators included control mutuality, satisfaction, trust and commitment. One PRSA-sponsored research project applied the index to the U.S. banking industry. That study found a positive correlation between the financial performance of publicly traded banks and their customer relationship scores (Avent & Ki, 2010).

A common element in many deductive studies was a concept of "exchange" and "communal" relationships (Clark & Mills, 1993). "Exchange" relationships were strategic and utilitarian, but they often broke down when disagreements arose between the parties involved. "Communal" relationships were based on emotional ties and were likely to survive disputes.

Communitarian scholars focused on the communal nature of relationships in community contexts. Leeper (2001) argued that interaction between an organization and its surrounding community was the best way to promote social harmony. Consequently, public relations efforts should be two-way and symmetrical, not one-way and instrumental. Parties to the dialogue would co-create meaning. The organization would not deliver its predetermined meaning to the public and force people to accept it.

Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) and Starck and Kruckeberg (2001) said the ultimate goal of public relations should be to restore a sense of community lost because of 20th century urbanization. Citing ideas from the Chicago School of Sociology, Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) said industrialization had destroyed America's traditional rural communities. Improved transportation had allowed people to move from rural small towns to large cities. People in cities lived largely in social isolation (atomized individuals). Improved communication could overcome that isolation and reestablish community ties. Public relations, as primarily a communication discipline, could help people become aware of common interests with organizations. Consequently, public relations practitioners had a duty to society at large, not just to their clients or organizations, to promote community. Kruckeberg and Starck called facilitating communication the public relations practitioner's "highest calling" (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988: 112).

Interestingly, Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) said that not all interactions would, or should, be favorable. "Public opinion is the product of communicated disagreement refined through debate and intellectual confrontation" (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988: 69). Conflicts were healthy as long as they were based on shared norms. That idea echoed Leeper (2001)'s view that dialogue was the best way to promote social cohesion and harmony.

Slife (2004) noted a similar need for dialogue in strong community relationality. Independently, Heath (2006) identified the same concept as communitas. He said it transcended "the structures and functions of individuals and organizations" (2006: 106). Slife (2004) differed from communitarian public relations scholars in one key ontological way. He maintained that no one created strong relationality. While people could create communities of belief, strong relationality existed as an inherent part of human context.

Slife (2004) said a community of belief was made up of autonomous individuals thought to share generally common abstract opinions, values or concepts (political views, religious beliefs, professional ethics, social prejudices, economic philosophies, etc.). The biggest threat to a community of belief was disunity (disagreement or conflict over the commonly shared beliefs or values). As a result, community members often avoided topics of potential conflict (leading to the old admonition, "Never discuss religion or politics"). Persuasion and ostracism were primary defenses against disunity. Those with the majority viewpoint worked hard to show people with other opinions the right way to think or silenced their dissenting voices. If disagreement became too threatening and the minority would not assent to the dominant view, the majority was likely to ostracize or excommunicate the malcontents and, thus, eliminate dissent (Slife, 2004). Noelle-Neumann (1974) captured that dynamic in her spiral of silence theory of public opinion.

The strong relational community in creation could tolerate disunity. Despite differences of opinion, people always remained connected by virtue of location, shared associations, common practices or relationship to God (Slife, 2004). Heath (2006) said identification with the community was vital for strong relationality (communitas). People needed to see themselves as bound together with others in the community (Heath, 2006).

In a community in creation, members were individuals and different. In fact, a strong relational community required difference. An important task in communities based on creation was protecting "otherness". Common beliefs were secondary to relationships. The main threat to a strong relational community—as illustrated by White (2009)—was loss of meaningful dialogue. As a result, conflict was sought. Conflict brought ideas into competition and enhanced intellectual growth and learning. Community members did not merely tolerate one another's beliefs. People wanted to engage them. Proponents of different views might even try to persuade others concerning the merits of their perspective, but pressure for agreement was not a factor in maintaining community. Disagreement would not jeopardize the community foundation or lead to a breach in relationships (Slife, 2004). The need for dialogue resembled Kruckeberg and Starck (1988)'s description of how communities formed public opinion.

Slife and Heath's transcendent concepts of strong relationality are consistent with theology in Abrahamic faiths and have implications for religion communicators. Abrahamic faiths teach that all humans are children of a creator God. Accepting strong relationality based on God's creation could alter how religion communicators understand community, practice public relations and engage in intercultural dialogues.

## Relationality in Public Relations Models

Excellence theory research (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002)—and the four models of public relations associated with it—reflects both weak and strong understandings of community. Excellence theory has provided the dominant paradigm for public relations research from 1991 to 2006 (Botan & Hazelton, 2006).

Roots of the excellence theory go back to James Grunig's doctoral research in Colombia in 1968-69. He wanted to know how farmers used information to make decisions. He developed situational theories of publics in 1966 (Grunig, 1966) to explain what Colombian farmers did (Grunig, 2006). The situational theories posited that people were more likely to seek information related to a decision they were making than to reinforce their attitudes. Building on the situational theories, Grunig developed an organizational theory of public relations (Grunig, 1976). It dealt with the interaction of organizations with individuals. The theory maintained that organizations were more likely to give information than to seek information. That one-way information flow resulted in ineffective communication (Grunig, 2006). Continuing work on the organizational theory led to Grunig's four models of public relations practice. He first presented them in 1984 as ideal types based on historic trends (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The models have since become classic descriptions of distinct positive approaches to corporate communication (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). The four models are:

*Press Agentry/Publicity Model*
Promotional information is transmitted one way from an organization—primarily through mass media—to a generally undefined audience. The goal is attention or influence. Truth and accuracy are not factors. No audience research is involved.

*Public Information Model*
Factual, newsworthy information is transmitted one way from an organization to news media outlets for dissemination to users of those outlets. News releases reflect journalistic news values. The emphasis is on education, not persuasion. The journalistic norms of truth and accuracy are accepted. No audience research is involved.

*Two-way Asymmetrical Model*
An organization uses intelligence from audience research to determine actions and craft messages designed to achieve specific goals. The focus is on persuading target groups to behave as the organization wants. Information collected on audiences is not used to modify the goals, policies or actions of the organization. Research simply guides message crafting.

*Two-way Symmetrical Model*
An organization uses audience research to determine actions that will promote understanding and reduce conflicts with key publics. Information collected on audiences may influence what an organization does and says.

Grunig (1989) said the four models could be collapsed into two worldviews. The first three could be considered functional or instrumental. The two-way symmetrical model could be considered reciprocal (what later scholars called communitarian).

In Slife (2004)'s terms, the publicity and public information models reflect information transmission, not relationality. The two-way asymmetrical model represents a functional concept of communication and weak relationality. The goal of communication is to persuade people to do what the communicator wants. The two-way symmetrical model includes elements of both weak and strong relationality.

Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) said the two-way symmetrical model drew on dialogical concepts from Bakhtin (1981). Other hermeneutical scholars cited him as well. Leeper (2001) said two-way symmetrical communication should be the dominant model in communitarian public relations practice. Interaction between the communicator and those in the community was necessary for constructing truth. Nevertheless, presuppositions of symmetrical communication (Grunig, 1989) implied that if practitioners followed certain procedures, symmetrical communication would result. That emphasis on correct procedure excluded target publics from meaning co-creation (Leeper, 2001).

In Slife (2004)'s approach, the symmetrical model describes mutual influence between an organization and its publics. But the goal is consensus, a sign of weak relationality. Individuals, organizations and publics use communication to adjust their ideas and behaviours to each other rather than to control what other people thought. Publics are just as likely to influence an organization as an organization are to influence those publics. But at another level of analysis, the symmetrical relationship could be seen as ongoing give and take between the organization and publics. That would be closer to Slife's strong relationality.

## Religion Communicators Describe Understanding of Public Relations

Because "community" is important to most faith traditions—especially the three Abrahamic religions—we could expect to find communitarian ideas influencing religion public relations practice. Research in 2006-07 in the United States among members of the Religion Communicators Council shed some light on that expectation. The research (Cannon, 2009; in press) addressed several research questions, including:

> RQ1: Which approach to public relations represented by the four excellence models do religion communications most agree with?
> RQ2: How well do religion communicators know what their supervisors think about practices in the four models of public relations?
> RQ3: How do the roles that religion communicators play compare to what faith group leaders expect?

The council has more than 500 members. They work in public relations, advertising, news and other communication activities. Members represent Baha'i, Christian, Hare Krishna, Jewish, and Muslim organizations. The council focuses on bringing faith perspectives to public discourse. Additional missions include building an understanding and acceptance of diverse faith groups among council members and promoting understanding and acceptance of religious faith and faith communities in American society.

### *Survey Methodology and Results*

Results from two surveys were used to answer the research questions. One survey involved RCC members. The other sought feedback from their supervisors. Questionnaires for both surveys replicated items used by Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) in their research among 327 secular organizations.

Members of the Religion Communicators Council answered questions in late 2006 and early 2007. E-mail invitations to participate in the first survey were sent to all 479 communicators with e-mail addresses on file in the RCC membership database as of October 1, 2006. Responses came from 185 (39%) by April 30, 2007. They represented 22 of the 32 faith groups listed for RCC members in 2006. Nearly 20% of RCC respondents worked for national-level faith organizations, such as denominational agencies or organizational headquarters. Another 21% worked for regional judicatories, such as synods, dioceses, conferences, or state conventions. Nine percent served local entities, usually individual congregations or temples. Thirty-four percent had jobs with other faith-related agencies. Those included children's or retirement homes, colleges, religious publications, or special organizations, such as religious orders, men's fellowships, and anti-hunger agencies. Fifteen percent did not indicate where they worked.

In early 2008 a second questionnaire went to 87 leaders of faith groups and organizations represented by religion communicators who responded to the first survey. Questions about public relations were similar to ones that religion communicators had answered. Twenty-nine leaders (33%) responded by May 1, 2008. They represented 10 Christian groups. Forty-one percent of leaders headed regional judicatories. Twenty-four percent led faith-related organizations, such as religious orders, ecumenical associations, or seminaries. Seventeen percent ran denominational agencies, and another 17% were denominational chief executives. Their most common titles were "bishop" or "general secretary" (41%), "president" or "chief executive officer" (28%), and "executive director" (21%).

### *RQ1: Religion Communicators Agree with Two-Way Approach*

RQ1 asked which public relations model religion communicators would favour. *Table 1* shows results from the first survey (Cannon, In press). Religion communicators agreed most with the two-way symmetrical model and disagreed most with the public information model. But low reliability coefficients for three of the four models raised questions about the scales in this sample. Earlier surveys showed much higher reliability coefficients for the four statements used to describe each models (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Therefore, a factor analysis was conducted to see if religion communicators grouped the 16 measures differently from the original factoring reported by Grunig (1992).

***Table 1:*** **Mean Agreement by RCC Members with Four Models of Public Relations**

| ***Model*** | ***Mean*** | ***Alpha*** |
|---|---|---|
| Two-way symmetrical | 3.62 | .62 |
| Two-way asymmetrical | 3.49 | .55 |
| Press agentry/publicity | 2.71 | .54 |
| Public information | 2.52 | .24 |

n = 116
Responses were: 1 "Strongly disagree", 2 "Disagree", 3 "Neither agree nor disagree", 4 "Agree", 5 "Strongly agree".

The resulting factors did remix statements about the four approaches. *Table 2* shows the results (Cannon, in press). The four factors included only 12 of Grunig's 16 original measures of public relations practice. Three statements about the public information model and one about the publicity model did not load.

Factor 1 mirrored the systematic influence of the two-way asymmetrical model. This factor showed a strong emphasis on advance research as a basis for planning communication efforts and follow-up research as a basis for evaluating results—particularly opinion changes. Factor 1 focused on how an organization could learn about publics so it could successfully influence them.

Factor 2 emphasized persuasion through publicity and seemed to match the current popular understanding of public relations. Organizations used communication techniques to seek publicity. Publicity was the purpose of public relations. The goal of public relations was to get publics to behave the way the organization wanted.

Factor 3 emphasized mutual influence and was very close to the two-way symmetrical model. The focus was on using communication to build two-way understanding, mediate conflicts between organizations and publics, and let publics influence the organization as much as it influences them.

Factor 4 emphasized using media relations to get positive news coverage. The focus was on getting accurate, positive information about the organization into the news and avoiding bad publicity.

The four factors gave insights into how religion communicators understood public relations. Religion communicators did not link statements the way secular practitioners had done in previous surveys. RCC members did recognize three mutual-influence statements from the two-way symmetrical model as one approach to public relations. But religion communicators appeared to put more emphasis on persuasion, publicity and good media relations than the models did. That emphasis reflected weak relationality—or community based on belief.

Measures of the two-way symmetrical model included a statement about conflict resolution. That statement said: "Public relations should provide mediation for the organization—to help management and publics negotiate conflicts". Religion communicators did not show strong agreement with it. The 3.42 median response would be considered "neither agree nor disagree". Among faith group leaders who supervise communicators, the median response was 2.81—clearly leaning toward "disagree". That was the lowest median response among faith group leaders for any statement about the two-way symmetrical model. Those survey responses suggest that neither religion communicators nor their bosses see a functional role for public relations in conflict resolution. If observers expect to see more initiatives by religion communicators like the ones described in Tilson (2009), thinking in both groups needs to change.

***Table 2:*** **Factor Loading for RCC Member Responses to Measures of Public Relations Models**

| ***Measures*** | ***Factor Loading*** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***1*** | ***2*** | ***3*** | ***4*** | ***Communality*** |
| Before beginning a public relations program, one should do research to determine public attitudes toward the organization and how they might be changed. | .85 | | | | .57 |
| Before starting a public relations program, survey or informal research should be done to find out how much management and our publics understand each other. | .80 | | | | .58 |
| Before starting a public relations program, one should look at attitude surveys to make sure the organization and its policies are described in ways our publics would be most likely to accept. | .58 | | | | .40 |
| After completing a public relations program, research should be done to determine how effective it has been in changing people's attitudes. | .43 | | | | .29 |
| The purpose of public relations is, quite simply, to get publicity for this organization. | | .68 | | | .34 |
| In public relations the broad goal is to persuade publics to behave as the organization wants them to behave. | | .58 | | | .37 |
| For this organization public relations and publicity mean essentially the same thing. | | .48 | | | .24 |
| The purpose of public relations is to develop mutual understanding between the management of the organization and the publics the organization affects. | | | .62 | | .29 |
| Public relations should provide mediation for the organization—to help management and publics negotiate conflicts. | | | .60 | | .40 |
| The purpose of public relations is to change attitudes and behaviors of management as much as it is to change the attitudes and behaviors of publics. | | | .40 | | .26 |
| In public relations accurate information should be disseminated, but unfavorable information should not be volunteered. | | | | .70 | .41 |
| In public relations one mostly attempts to get favorable publicity into the media and to keep unfavorable publicity out. | | | | .63 | .47 |
| Eigenvalues | 2.15 | 1.37 | 1.26 | 1.15 | |
| % of variance | 13.43 | 8.59 | 7.85 | 7.18 | |

Loadings < .40 are omitted.

### *RQ2: Communicators Overestimate Support for One-Way Models*

The most unexpected survey finding related to RQ2. It asked how well religion communicators could predict what their supervisors thought about public relations practices in the four models of public relations. Religion communicators clearly did not know how their supervisors understood public relations. Communicators overestimated support for the publicity and public information approaches and underestimated support for the two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical models. Communicators thought faith group leaders would consider attendance at events a primary indicator of public relations success, publicity the purpose of public relations, and getting good news coverage the primary objective of communication work. Top executives generally disagreed with those ideas and were much more interested in researched-based efforts to establish relationships (Cannon, in press). Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) did not find such distinct differences between secular communicators and their supervisors. The disconnect in the 2006-07 survey did not speak well for religion communicators. Thirty-six percent of survey respondents said they were on their organization’s senior management team. Two-thirds said they reported directly to their organization’s chief executive. With that type of direct access, how could communicators not know what their bosses thought about public relations?

### *Communicators’ Roles Considered*

That question about what leaders thought prompted a look at other survey items. They related to what religion communicators said they did for their organizations (Cannon, 2009). Broom and Smith (1979) initially developed and tested four conceptual models of public relations roles. Those roles were:

- Expert prescriber: The practitioner functions as an authority on both the public relations problem and solution. The practitioner researches and defines the problem, develops the solution, and takes major responsibility for implementing the solution.
- Communication process facilitator: The practitioner serves as a liaison, interpreter, and mediator between the organization and its publics. The emphasis is on maintaining a continuous flow of two-way communication. The practitioner is a collaborator with both management and the various publics.
- Problem-solving facilitator: As a member of the management team, the practitioner works with others throughout the organization to define and solve problems. The communicator helps guide other managers and the organization through a rational problem-solving process. That process may involve all parts of the organization in public relations planning and programming.
- Communications technician: Practitioners provide clients with a specialized skill to carry out public relations functions. Rather than being part of the management team, communicators prepare and produce materials—as writers, editors, audiovisual producers, and media relations specialists—for public relations efforts. Technicians are not usually involved in organizational decision making. They explain decisions made by others.

Broom (1982), Broom and Dozier (1986), Dozier (1983; 1984; 1992), and Dozier and Broom (1995) further tested these models. They eventually identified two overarching roles: *public relations manager* and *technician*. The manager category included the three non-technician roles that Broom and Smith (1979) had named.

Broom (1982) developed seven statements to measure each of his four roles. The 2006-2007 survey replicated those items (Cannon, 2009).

### *RQ3: Communicators Describe Themselves as Technicians*

RQ3 asked how well roles that religion communicators performed in their organizations compared to what their supervisors expected. Results again showed a disconnect between what religion communicators said they did and what their supervisors said they wanted. Communicators described themselves as technicians. They spent most of their days writing, editing, and maintaining media contacts. Top executives said they wanted their communicators to be managers. Specifically, leaders were looking for expert prescribers and problem-solving facilitators. Such communicators would diagnose communication problems, point out needs for systematic communication planning, plan and recommend courses of action, outline alternative approaches, keep management involved in communications decisions, make communication policy decisions, and take responsibility for the success or failure of the communication effort. Communicators considered all those tasks less important than their supervisors did. Top executives did not expect communicators to spend much time taking pictures or editing materials written by others for grammar and spelling. But that’s what communicators said they did. Interestingly for 2006-2007, these communication technicians were not using new Web 2.0 media such as blogs or podcasts (Cannon, 2009).

## Discussion: Work Environment, Knowledge May Affect Responses

Work environment might have influenced responses from religion communicators. A quarter said they were the only communication person in their organization. Another third represented departments with fewer than five people. Someone had to produce the communication products, take questions from reporters, and prepare responses. Those technical duties would likely leave little time for more managerial functions. Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) reported a similar situation among the 64 non-profit organizations in their excellence studies. Communication staffs in those nonprofits were small—often just one person. As a result, communicators filled both manager and technician roles. Nevertheless, communicators in secular nonprofits were usually more involved in strategic planning than their corporate counterparts. Religion communicators said they were only sometimes involved in strategic planning.

Previous studies connected knowledge with communicators acting as managers. Such knowledge came from formal education, reading trade publications, and participating in professional associations (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Survey results showed that a quarter of religion communicators had no formal communication training. Few religion communicators read trade publications or belonged to secular communication organizations. Consequently, some religion communicators might not have the background to think of themselves as anything more than technicians. Limited knowledge might contribute as well to differences between what communicators do and what their supervisors expect. Without solid formal training or ongoing interaction with secular practitioners, religion communicators might never consider different ways to approach their work. Through RCC, they might have encountered the debate about in-house journalists vs. promoter. Through religious books and magazines, they might have seen information about branding and marketing to sell the faith. But by not reading trade publications, religion communicators were not likely to have seen arguments for being a manager, not a technician. Outside a formal classroom, they were not likely to have heard anyone talk about liberal vs. communitarian approaches to public relations thinking.

By concentrating on technical aspects of communication output, religion communicators may not be providing the public relations guidance that top executives say they expect (Cannon, 2009). Consequently, communicators may be limiting any role they may have in fostering dialogue, encouraging cooperation, and discouraging polarization. Furthermore, by focusing on persuasion, publicity, and positive media coverage, religion communicators may not think to develop the kinds of initiatives that Dietz (2009), Tilson (2009), and Williams (2009) describe.

**Conclusion: Toward strong relationality**

Seeing relationality grounded in creation and not belief would change religion public relations practice. Harmony and consensus would no longer be goals in interfaith or intercultural dialogues. Consensus would be too weak a foundation for relationships. Simple disagreements could disrupt a consensus-based community. Strong relationality (Heath, 2006; Slife, 2004) would be more stable. A community in creation would allow both religion communicators and faith group leaders to engage in interreligious and intercultural dialogues more intensely and authentically. Rather than worrying about the consensus and harmony, faith group representatives could focus on generating robust dialogue and discerning God's truths. That interaction should promote intellectual and spiritual growth.

The strong relational perspective should end the eight-decade debate about what U.S. religion communicators should do. Communicators would know they were not just reporters, promoters, or marketers (although they might act at times in all those roles). They would be dialogue agents who help people co-create meaning and discern God's will.

Acknowledging community in creation has theological and practical implications for religion communicators, especially those in Abrahamic faiths. Theologically, the strong-relationality approach aligns the focus of religion communication with how Abrahamic traditions describe a creator God. Those traditions teach that all people are part of God's family—even when they rebel against divine rule. God established the human community at creation. Individuals cannot escape that context. In fact, that relationship defines their being and worldview. People may choose not to acknowledge the relationship with others through God and creation, but it is always there. To make their work theologically consistent with their beliefs, therefore, religion communicators should reject instrumental public relations practices based on persuasion, consensus and communities of belief. Instead, communicators should operate as if everyone were connected through God's creation and needed to interact.

Practically, an understanding of the strong relational perspective should change how religion communicators approach intercultural dialogue, engage issues, and handle conflict. Each member of God's family is individual and different—theologically, politically and socially. Family members will not agree on everything. Nevertheless, they remain part of the community. Communicators should not strive for or expect agreement as faith groups engage issues. Instead, communicators should encourage people to share their differences through dialogue. Leeper (2001) said dialogue was essential to community. Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) called facilitating such dialogue a public relations practitioner's highest calling. Therefore, to contribute effectively to interreligious and intercultural dialogues, religion communicators need to understand the idea of strong community relationality and adjust their public relations practices accordingly. Religion communicators need to promote robust dialogue within the community in creation. That dialogue might lead humanity closer to divine truth.

Clearly, the communication environment has changed since the two RCC-related surveys were done. The growing influence of social media may push religion communicators toward a new perspective on relationality so they can keep doing their jobs. The digital world reflects the strong relationality of Heath (2006) and Slife (2004). Religion communicators in the 2006-07 survey were not involved much with Web 2.0 media, such as blogs or podcasts. But social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, have now become important public relations tools. People are calling public relations in this interactive environment PR 2.0 (Brackenridge, 2008).

Capabilities of social media change how organizations relate to various publics. Social media demonstrate the communication-based community envisioned by the Chicago School and described by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988). Belief and persuasion are not key factors in Web 2.0 relationships. Gone is the win-lose emphasis on making sure everyone agrees. Members are different. They seek engagements. Members do not avoid conflicts. Dialogue is often robust, and online communities continue to grow. Community identification (Heath, 2006) is based on interactions with others through social networks. Such online networks may help establish a pattern for non-digital relationships. If such strong connections can exist online, why can they not exist in other human interactions?

In a strong relational community, people of faith do not need to fear dialogue. In fact, they can embrace it. Squabbles cannot destroy strong relationships. Believers should see no need for polarization, estrangement, or broken community ties as members of the human family explore ideas and celebrate the diversity of God's creation.

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