Research in Brief

Tracking public relations scholarship trends: Using semantic network analysis on PR Journals from 1975 to 2011

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

A semantic network analysis of keywords in titles of studies published in Public Relations Review and the Journal of Public Relations Research was conducted to determine the salient keywords in public relations scholarship from 1975 to 2011. "Communication," "PR," "public," "practitioner," and "corporation" have been the most prominent keywords, and the association of "PR-practitioner" was the most salient keyword association in public relations scholarship consistently.

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1. Introduction

Public Relations Review (PRR) and the Journal of Public Relations Research (JPRR) are widely regarded as the most representative journals in public relations. There have been numerous efforts to examine public relations scholarship by content and bibliometric analysis of published studies examining it as an aggregate of all studies in these two leading journals (e.g., Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003). However, there have been few efforts to review the articles in these two journals separately to find their distinctive characteristics and to examine public relations scholarship using methods beyond content analysis. This study applied semantic network analysis to explore the intellectual development in public relations by discovering salient keywords with no predetermined criteria.

2. Method

Semantic network analysis is a research paradigm that uses "network analytic techniques on paired associations based on shared meaning" (Doerfel, 1998, p. 16), and focuses on associations between words. Following a study by Doerfel and Barnett (1999) that applied semantic network analysis to review titles of articles to find the structure of an academic discipline, the unit of analysis for this study was all of the words in the titles of articles published in PRR from the journal's inception, 1975–2011 and in JPRR from the journal's inception, 1989–2011.

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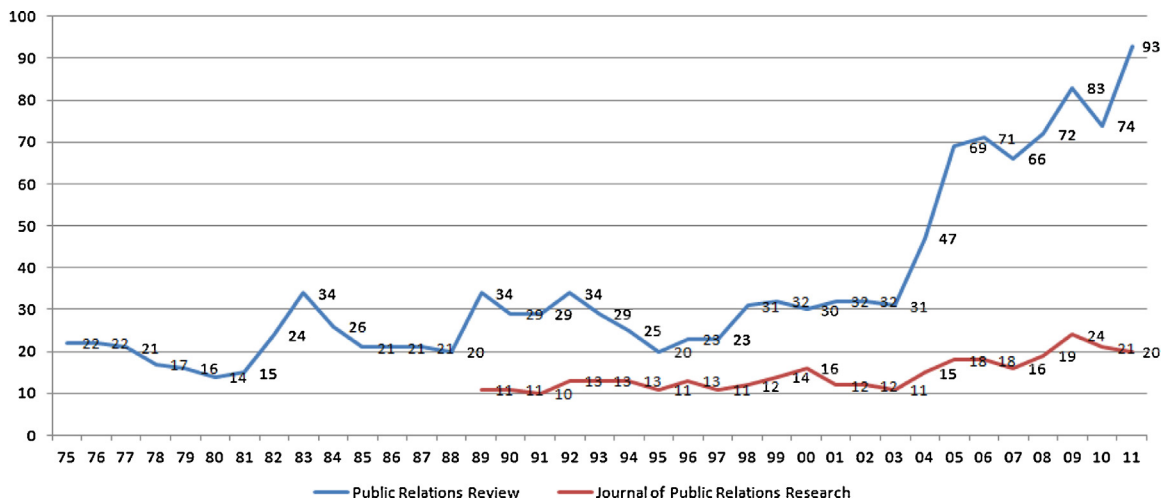[2] Tel.: +1 706 542 3178.

Fig. 1. Total number of studies published in each year in both journals.

Table 1
Frequency of top ten keywords for each period in both journals.

Public relations review								Journal of public relations research			
1975–1989		1990–1999		2000–2011				1989–1999		2000–2011	
Frequency	Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency	Keyword			Frequency	Keyword	Frequency	Keyword
152	PR	157	PR	357	PR			84	PR	116	PR
29	Communication	21	Communication	101	Crisis			21	Communication	36	Effect
23	Research	20	Crisis	99	Communication			19	Study	29	Relation
22	Study	20	Practitioner	62	Corporation			19	Theory	23	Communication
19	Corporation	18	Education	58	Effect			16	Organization	23	Strategy
18	Practitioner	18	Ethics	52	Analysis			16	Public	23	Theory
18	Role	17	Public	52	Strategy			15	Practitioner	22	Corporation
16	Education	17	Use	52	Study			15	Role	21	Crisis
16	Public	15	Corporation	51	Practitioner			14	Research	19	Model
15	Effect	14	Issue	51	Public			13	Corporation	18	Public
		14	Management	51	Relation			13	Effect		

3. Findings

All of the keywords from the titles of all articles (n = 1303, 79.6%) published in PRR and from all of the articles (n = 334, 20.4%) published in JPRR were used for the analysis. Fig. 1 shows the total number of studies in each year, and the number of studies published each year has increased substantially since 2005.

A frequency analysis of keywords in PRR in each era was conducted, and "PR" ranked first in all three time periods. PR, communication, corporation, practitioner, and public appeared in the top rankings across all three time periods. The keyword, crisis, saw a rapid increase in prominence, ranking third in the 1990s and second in the 2000s. Strategy and analysis become more prominent in the 2000s than they were in the 1990s.

Distinctive keywords in the 1970s and 1980s were research, role, evaluation, theory, campaign, and value. In the 1990s, crisis, education, ethics, issue, strategy, culture, and news appeared most prominently. In the 2000s, crisis, effect, analysis, strategy, study, relation, organization, media, and case were the most salient keywords. Additionally, numerous Internet-related keywords, such as Website, Web, online, social media, blog, Internet, WWW, and Twitter, appeared in rankings in the 2000s. In the 2000s, the names of specific countries and regions (other than the U.S.) also began appearing, such as China, Korea, Europe, Arab world, Spain, and U.K.

In JPRR, PR ranked first in both the 1990s and the 2000s. Most keywords, such as PR, communication, theory, public, practitioner, corporation, analysis, management, image, practice, culture, perception, power, and use appeared without a significant fluctuation in ranking across both time periods. Other keywords, such as effect, relation, crisis, model, and response, became more salient in the 2000s compared to the 1990s. Finally, common top keywords in the two journals were compared, and PR, communication, corporation, practitioner, and public were found to be salient keywords in both journals across all time periods. JPRR included the keyword "theory," which PRR did not (Table 1).

A co-word analysis was conducted with keywords in each time period in PRR. In the 1970s and 80s, the association of PR-research (n = 12) appeared most. It was followed by PR-education (n = 10), PR-role, PR-management, PR-study (n = 9), PR-theory (n = 8), etc. In the 1990s, PR-education (n = 17) ranked first, followed by PR-practitioner (n = 16), issue-management (n = 11), PR-use (n = 10), etc. In the 2000s, crisis-communication (n = 45) ranked first, followed by PR-practitioner (n = 38),

PR-use ($n = 29$), PR-national, PR-effect ($n = 28$), etc. In PRR, there was a big increase in the number of keywords, and accordingly, numerous associations of keywords were found in the 2000s. PR-study, PR-practitioner, and PR-use appeared to be the most salient associations of keywords in all three periods. PR-research ranked first in the 1970s and 80s, and other associations using academic keywords were also found: PR-study, PR-theory, and research-evaluation. PR-education was the most frequent association in the 1990s and the second-most frequent association in the 1970s and 80s. In the 2000s, crisis-communication ranked first. In addition, there were numerous associations using the keyword "crisis" in the 2000s, such as crisis-response, crisis-management, crisis-strategy, repair-image, crisis-organization, and PR-crisis.

A co-word analysis was conducted with the keywords in JPRR. In the 1990s, the association of PR-practitioner appeared most ($n = 17$), followed by PR-theory ($n = 15$), PR-research ($n = 12$), PR-role ($n = 10$), etc. In the 2000s, the association of PR-effect appeared most ($n = 22$), followed by PR-theory ($n = 19$), PR-practitioner ($n = 18$), effect-strategy ($n = 15$), effect-communication ($n = 13$), etc. PR-practitioner and PR-theory were the most salient associations consistently found in JPRR during both the 1990s and 2000s. In the 1990s, associations using academic keywords, such as PR-theory, PR-research, and PR-study, ranked at the top. In the 2000s, associations using the keyword "effect" became prominent; PR-effect ranked as the top association, while effect-strategy, effect-communication, and effect-relation also became significant associations, despite their absence in the 1990s. Finally, co-word analysis findings from the two journals were compared, and the association of PR-practitioner was found to be the most salient keyword association in public relations scholarship.

4. Conclusion

This study identifies topics and trends and the role each of these journals have played in the development of public relations scholarship. Specifically:

1. Roles research dominated in the 1970s and 80s in PRR and in the 90s in JPRR.
2. Topics related to public relations education and ethics were evident in the 90s in PRR.
3. Crisis research, especially as related to strategy or management, began to appear with more frequency in the 90s in PRR and 2000s in JPRR.
4. Relationship research was strong from the 1970s through the 2000s in PRR and became a focus in JPRR in the 2000s.
5. Globalization was the focus of research in the 1990s and 2000s in PRR.
6. Theory has dominated in JPRR throughout the journal's history.
7. PRR often seems to identify the research agenda, which then transfers to JPRR.

PR, communication, public, practitioner, and corporation were the most commonly emphasized keywords in public relations scholarship from 1975 to 2011. This suggests emphasis on corporate public relations, practitioners, and communication with publics during this time period, perhaps to the neglect of public relations in agency, nonprofit or activist settings. Linking this finding with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) definition of public relations as "management of communication between an organization and its publics" (p. 6), it can be seen that public relations scholarship has embraced their definition, although "organization" might be skewed to a corporation. The most salient association was "PR" and "practitioners" across time periods. This suggests that PR scholars have persistently tried to link scholarship and practice. When comparing and contrasting salient keywords in the two journals, JPRR has been more focused across time compared to PRR. PRR exhibited a more research-oriented tradition in the 1970s and 1980s, emphasized education in the 1990s, and transitioned to a focus on crisis communication in the 2000s. PRR included more diverse keywords and seemed more active in exploring new research trends than did JPRR. JPRR emphasized research-oriented approaches in the1990s and focused on studies about effects in public relations in the 2000s. JPRR has consistently emphasized academic keywords such as study, theory, research, and analysis. Particularly, the association of PR and theory appeared most prominently throughout the history of JPRR.

Finally, this research identifies research topics to be revisited based on changes in the profession or practice since the subjects' previous dominance. By identifying research trends and networks, this scholarship provides direction for new or renewed studies. For example, education and ethics may be ripe for revisiting since their prevalence in the 1990s. The findings unpack several such research opportunities based on changes in public relations strategies and tools.

Acknowledgement

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