



Backs to the Wall: How Public Relations Carries Discomfort for Organisations

by Fiona Campbell

University of Hertfordshire Business School Working Paper (2010)

The Working Paper Series is intended for rapid dissemination of research results, work-in-progress, and innovative teaching methods, at the pre-publication stage. Comments are welcomed and should be addressed to the individual author(s). It should be remembered that papers in this series are often provisional and comments and/or citations should take account of this.

Copyright and all rights therein are retained by the authors. All persons copying this information are expected to adhere to the terms and conditions invoked by each author's copyright. These works may not be re-posted without the explicit permission of the copyright holders.

The Business School at the University of Hertfordshire (UH) employs approximately 150 academic staff in a state-of-the-art environment located in Hatfield Business Park. It offers 17 undergraduate degree programmes, 20 postgraduate programmes and there are about 65 research students working for their doctorates.

Business School staff are active in research in numerous areas, including complexity theory, institutional economics, economic modelling, the creative industries, employment studies, finance, accounting, statistical methods and management science.

The University of Hertfordshire has been recognised as the exemplar of a business-facing university. It is one of the region's largest employers with over 2,700 staff and a turnover of £205 m.

In the 2008 UK Research Assessment Exercise it was given the highest rank for research quality among the post-1992 universities.

University of Hertfordshire Business School Working Papers can be downloaded from tinyurl.com/workingpapers

Backs to the Wall: How Public Relations Carries Discomfort for Organisations

Fiona Campbell, University of Hertfordshire, UK

Email: Fiona.campbell99@ntlworld.com

Abstract

Public relations plays a sensitive role in dealing with the discomfort felt within organisations about the ethical implications of their operations. Organisational discomfort seems to be on the increase, and this may be as a result of demands for greater transparency. The purpose of public relations is to tell an organisation's side of the story. This role is mission critical, yet practitioners do not necessarily have the status to enable them to carry it out effectively. The practice appears to take on organisations' discomfort and deal with it by justifying decisions in which it has no part. Blatant attempts to mask the source of discomfort do not work, but they seem to be commonplace. Practitioners often seem to find themselves with their backs to the wall. Blaming the media may make them feel less uncomfortable. Practitioners seem to keep quiet about this aspect of their work, and it may be seen as valuable, especially when the discomfort is the leader's own. Practitioners seem to need to believe completely in what the organisation is doing, otherwise they could not bear the discomfort. It is not acknowledged. It could be a cause of "essential dissonance" (Berger 2005) within the field. Seen this way, the discomfort in and around public relations appears to be endemic.

Critical theory is used to question the practice, drawing on the work of Foucault to interrogate the power that is inherent in public relations discourse. My approach is linguistic, drawing on Saussure and Derrida, and applying deconstruction which seeks to open up institutions to reveal what has been repressed or "forgotten". This work is "disconcerting and deliberately so" (Kamuf, 1991, ix)

This paper reports on ongoing research into how the UK practice represents its work (Campbell, Herman, Noble 2006) The research problem is the apparent contradiction between the way that practitioners explain what they do, and what they actually do in their daily work. My research has challenged me to face up to my own sense of discomfort about public relations. I feel discomfort about the public perception of the practice in the UK, and I understand the frustrations of the publics. I feel unease about the claims of transparency made by the practice. In my research interviews I have found similar discomfort within the practice, although it is not always identified as such.

Introduction

There are three main sections to the paper: methodology and methods, a review of critical theory, and results from my interviews, followed by a discussion.

Methodology and methods

This paper reports on initial findings from an ongoing qualitative inquiry into the nature and purpose of public relations based on an interpretive worldview. The methodology is influenced by the work of Stacey (2006) that sees research as “taking your own experience seriously”, which necessitates a deep and sometimes painful review of the researcher’s own assumptions and prejudices as an important part of the research process. This reflexivity demands that we interrogate each of our selves (Denzin, Lincoln 2000) which is a tremendous learning experience. This unpeeling of layers of taken-for-granted assumptions has to be iterative, and I am keeping a research diary to record new experiences as they happen to me. Taken-for-granted assumptions are not uncovered without a great deal of discomfort, and I found the first year of my research degree very difficult. I have been a public relations practitioner, and for several years I was course leader of a postgraduate diploma which trained graduates for a career in public relations. I also have close links with the CIPR, currently sitting on the Qualifications Awarding Body. So I think of myself as an insider, yet my research is obliging me to take a critical stance towards the field. This has caused me considerable tension, but it has been ultimately liberating to face up to my own discomfort.

The interpretive worldview suggests a flexible research design, and I was encouraged to start to identify themes through narrative. I produced a set of stories which people in public relations had told me about their work, and stories which I had come across in the course of my work. These outline themes formed the basis of a set of 12 questions for the in-depth interviews which I conducted in 2005-6. My initial plan was to interview three groups: senior practitioners, academics, and clients or employers of practitioners, and to conduct some focus groups to seek the views of the publics of public relations. Having conducted 21 in-depth interviews with senior practitioners and academics, I now find that I may need to group practitioners according to their background: in-house or consultancy; close to the field’s representative bodies and otherwise; from commercial and not-for-profit organisations. It is likely that practitioners who have always worked in-house have a different view of public relations from consultants, or that people who are intimately involved with the CIPR or PRCA may have a bias in their view of the field. These distinctions may prove to be significant. They should mean that I have a reasonable sample of interviewees representing different perspectives and providing me with rich data.

One of my research aims is to encourage practitioners to reflect on how they view public relations. I have written articles about my research in the CIPR journal *Profile*, and I have spoken to groups of practitioners, not just to gather data, but also to stimulate reflection on the research. The feedback from my second article in *Profile* suggests that people find my research thought-provoking, and the interviewees have also commented on how interesting they find the interview experience. I found that

many took notes of the ideas we discussed. So the interviews may also have influenced the participants to reflect on the nature of public relations.

Critical theory

My research problem is the apparent contradiction between the way that practitioners explain what they do, and what they actually do in their daily work. My interest is linguistic, which is why it is appropriate to use critical theory to examine this puzzle. Critical theory explores language, especially language used in legitimation. It reveals contradictions, and the claim of public relations to manage reputation while it has a poor reputation is an example of such a contradiction. Critical theory provides a lens to view the world reflexively, and it is essentially confrontational. It asks questions which are particularly uncomfortable for public relations because of its contradictory position and the problems it has with its own reputation.

The apparent rise in organisational discomfort may be linked to the postmodern loss of trust resulting from the two world wars and the holocaust (Sarup 1993) Public relations is intimately involved with trust, as it seeks to create 'good will' on the part of an organisation's publics. This loss of trust would make organisational leaders concerned about the reputation of the organisation they lead, and a practice that offers to help them with this would be welcomed. The loss of trust would provide public relations with an opportunity to raise its status. So public relations feeds off the lack of trust.

The suspicion of foundationalism that Pearson (Toth, Heath 1992) identifies as the hallmark of postmodern philosophy has implications for public relations. Public relations seeks to represent organisations through the creation of symbols which appear as 'reality', yet the postmodern view is that the world is largely symbolic. Bertens (1995:11) calls this "a crisis in representation: a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real, in the widest sense". It could be argued that public relations has contributed to this loss of faith in our ability to represent the real. Public relations is self-interested, as practitioners represent the interests of organisations. Practitioners maintain they manage reputation, yet this claim denies the self-interest. They seek to "manage" perceptions and to create a 'reality' that is favourable to the organisation they represent. The publics have become sceptical about these representations of 'reality'. It seems this has contributed to the loss of faith in our ability to represent the real. The attempts to deal with organisational discomfort lead to greater demands for transparency. So public relations contributes to the lack of trust as well as feeding off it.

Saussure argues that language constitutes our world, instead of merely recording or labelling it. This has profound implications for public relations, which seeks to tell an organisation's side of the story. The act of representation is called into question. There is a clear link to the crisis of representation identified by Bertens (1995:11) Public relations is mission critical (Cleaver 2004) yet practitioners do not necessarily have the status to carry it out effectively (Murray, White 2005) It seeks to use language to create a new 'reality' which is in the interest of the organisations it represents. The practice appears to take on organisations' discomfort and deal with it by justifying decisions in which it has no part.

Derrida applies poststructuralism in the critical method known as ‘deconstruction’ which Eagleton (Barry 1995:71) defines as “reading against the grain” or “reading the text against itself” with the purpose of “knowing the text as it cannot know itself” and uncovering all the issues which Barry claims are unconsciously “glossed over”. The deconstructionist looks for evidence of gaps, fissures and discontinuities in order to show that the text is at war with itself (Barry 1995) Derrida (1976:158) states that a deconstructive reading “must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of language that he uses” and that it “attempts to make the not-seen accessible to sight” (Derrida 1976:163) Eagleton explains the implication of the deconstructive view: “since language is something I am made out of, rather than a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction” (Sarup 1993:34) This takes forward the Saussurean insight that language constitutes ‘reality’, and calls into question the ‘reality’ of the subject. Barry’s (1995) use of the term “gloss over” can be applied to public relations, as public relations is said to ‘gloss over’ ideas that might make organisations uncomfortable. Applying deconstruction to my interview transcripts reveals considerable discomfort within public relations about its role in representing organisations. This discomfort may be audible in the form of a sigh or nervous laughter, yet it is not articulated. Nor do practitioners admit they lack the power to influence organisational decision-making. This only becomes evident by reading between the lines. Just as the practice seeks to gloss over the discomfort felt within organisations, so its practitioners seem to gloss over the discomfort that they appear to feel.

Foucault’s work is identified by Bertens (1995) as the second “moment” within poststructuralist postmodernism, where the emphasis is on the workings of power and the constitution of the subject. Knowledge and language are seen as bound up with power and therefore suspect. Foucault “interrogates” the power that is inherent in the discourses of institutions and the hegemony of any single discursive system, instead advocating difference and pluriformity (Bertens 1995:7-8) He sees the relationship between ‘truth’ and power as a “discursive practice”, and Barry (1995) sees an affinity between the term and both Gramsci’s “hegemony” and Althusser’s “interpellation”. He argues they are all concerned with the way power is internalised by those it disempowers, which means that it does not have to be enforced externally. Barry (1995:176) sees this as “a kind of thought control”. This presents a link to public relations, which could be seen as a discursive practice. Seeing public relations in this way suggests that leaders expect public relations to be able to take on the discomfort and make it disappear. Practitioners may be under pressure to wave a magic wand.

Foucault sees the relationship between truth and power as a system, claiming that ‘truth’ “is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (Rabinow 1984:72) Deleuze views Foucault’s treatment of power as “a relation between forces, or rather every relation between forces is a power relation” (Deleuze 1986:70) which suggests that power is not necessarily repressive but rather a technique to produce the effects of power. Foucault (Dreyfus, Rabinow 1982:208) notes that his objective “has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” and the production of human beings as subjects can be seen as one of the effects of power.

Foucault's perspective on power has implications for public relations. If knowledge and language are bound up with power, all representation by organisations can be seen as the attempt to exert power. Power is inherent in the discourses of organisations and public relations can be seen as the attempt to exert power in such a way that it does not have to be enforced externally. Public relations can be seen as the attempt by organisations to impose their view of the world in order to maintain their market position. Foucault's view of "norms" and "normalisation" can be applied to public relations. "The discourse of the king can disappear and be replaced by the discourse of the one who sets forth the norm, the one who engages in surveillance, who undertakes to distinguish the normal from the abnormal" (Morris, Patton 1979:65-66) Public relations could be seen as normalisation by organisations, a deliberate policy to represent the practices and views of the organisation as acceptable. This suggests that corporations are increasingly able to influence societal norms and to mould the views of their publics.

In conclusion, my interest in public relations is linguistic, and the importance of this theory lies in what it reveals about public relations. It appears to show public relations as exploiting the postmodern lack of trust to raise its status. This loss of trust leads to a loss of faith in our ability to represent the 'real'. Practitioners maintain they manage reputation, yet this claim denies the self interest of organisations. The publics have become sceptical about these representations of 'reality'. So public relations contributes to this lack of faith and feeds off it. The idea that language constitutes our world has implications for public relations, which seeks to represent organisations through language. The act of representation is called into question. Language can be seen as building its own parallel universe, and organisational reputation can be seen as 'virtual reality'.

Public relations can be seen as a discursive practice, a kind of thought control that forms a relationship between power and 'truth'. If knowledge and language are bound up with power, all representation by organisations can be seen as the attempt to exert power in such a way that it does not have to be enforced externally. Public relations can be seen as the attempt by organisations to impose their view of the world in order to maintain their market position. Public relations could be seen as normalisation by organisations, a deliberate policy to represent the practices and views of an organisation as acceptable. Given the increasing power of global corporations, they could seek to manage the views of the publics on 'reality'.

The following sections are based on my interview transcripts. They reveal that public relations plays a sensitive role in dealing with the discomfort felt within organisations about the ethical implications of their operations. This discomfort seems to be on the increase, and it may make practitioners feel uneasy. The interviews shed light on my research problem, which is the apparent contradiction between how practitioners explain what they do, and what they actually do. Part of the answer may lie in how the practice carries discomfort felt within organisations.

We mustn't take this too seriously

Public relations practitioners may not be consulted in planning, but they are expected to deal with discomfort arising from the ethical implications of their operations. This

seems to cause practitioners personal discomfort, which is not articulated but which is revealed in these transcripts. Taking on this role may help the practice to gain greater influence. Sometimes consultants are used to make clear to leaders that the discomfort will not disappear until its source is dealt with. Some in-house practitioners seem to lack the confidence to give this advice, and it seems that the leaders of some organisations do not have confidence in any of their public relations advisers in these situations. They may see public relations as a magic wand to make the problem disappear.

A speaker tells the story of a company which ran a promotion based on label redemption which went wrong, as it was impossible for schools to save enough tokens to win a prize. "I didn't come onto the scene until the deed had been done, the mistake had been made." The story was picked up by national television "and I was asked to solve the problem". The solution was to give away a dozen prizes to the schools which had saved the greatest number of tokens. "They bought it. But [the TV programme] said, "Following our discussions [company] has agreed to..." But it was worth it. *Yes, it did work.* It got the company off the hook". Here the public relations practitioner is not consulted in the planning of the promotion, but the practitioner is expected to clear up the mess when a mistake is made. Public relations seems to lack the power to influence decision-making at a senior level in order to prevent such mistakes being made. Later the speaker says "We were seen as the sick merchants who tried to pull the wool, and we got found out". This mistake caused the company discomfort, and public relations is used to try to make the discomfort go away. The practitioner carries the discomfort on behalf of the company. There seems to be some personal discomfort here, as the practitioner laughs and says, "We mustn't take this too seriously".

There is more laughter in another interview, where the speaker says, "And actually if you've got a bit of negative news, you put it out on a day when there's something important happening (laughter) Government has always done that". Later I take this up, and the speaker says "on balance, newspapers make more of bad news than they make of good news". The media are said to exaggerate news that makes organisations uncomfortable or they are blamed for finding out about it. Blaming the media may make practitioners feel less uncomfortable. Another speaker says that leading practitioners in the early post-war years saw themselves as a reflection of the intelligence service of the military. They were dealing with fear of nationalisation, and this fear is seen by the speaker as one of the drivers in the growth of the practice at that time. Here organisational discomfort is seen as offering the potential for public relations to grow in influence. The practitioner carries the discomfort on behalf of the organisation he or she works for, and the greater the discomfort, the more likely it seems that the practitioner will be recognised as playing a potentially significant role. One of these early practitioners is described as "one of the best PR consultants ever" and "of the 'my client right or wrong' school". This suggests that it is good practice for consultants to follow instructions and not to stand up to clients when they believe they are wrong. Consultants in particular may see carrying discomfort as their role.

Another speaker sees the role of consultants differently. "It's disappointing when you find that people, the clients feel that they can PR their way out of a situation". Here the situation is viewed pragmatically: "it is an important part of our role to challenge and to provide that external perspective and to get our clients and business leaders to

face up to realities”. Consultants are seen as advising clients that the source of the discomfort has to be dealt with, which may mean making some uncomfortable decisions. The speaker goes on to say that consultants are often used by in-house practitioners to “have that difficult conversation” with the leaders of organisations, as they provide an external perspective. It seems that the public relations departments lack confidence in their ability to have these conversations with the leaders. Dealing with discomfort seems to require more confidence than dealing with positive stories. The speaker goes on to say that “they have got to be willing to take advice”. It seems that the leaders of some organisations do not have confidence in any of their public relations advisers in these situations.

Public relations practitioners may not be consulted in planning, but they are expected to deal with discomfort that may arise from decision-making. Practitioners carry the discomfort on behalf of the organisation, and this may cause personal discomfort. Blaming the media may make practitioners feel less uncomfortable. Organisational discomfort may help public relations to grow in influence, and consultants may be used to carry the discomfort. Some consultants are used to advise leaders that the source of the discomfort has to be dealt with. Some in-house departments appear to lack confidence to give this advice, and it seems that the leaders of some organisations do not trust any of their public relations advisers to deal with this kind of discomfort.

People can spot it and smell it

Attempts to obscure the sources of discomfort are seen as “bad PR” that creates a foul smell. It seems that often practitioners are dealing with organisational discomfort, and the situation may cause them personal discomfort. Although blatant attempts to obscure do not work, they seem to be commonplace. Either practitioners do not understand this or they lack the power to convince leaders to act otherwise. Practitioners seem to keep quiet about dealing with issues that make organisations uncomfortable. The discomfort may be the leaders’ own, and dealing with this may make practitioners personally valuable. Organisational discomfort seems to be on the increase, and this may be a result of demands for greater transparency. It seems that organisations use practices that may be described as Orwellian in dealing with issues that make them uncomfortable.

Discomfort may lead to attempts to hide what is perceived by practitioners to be ‘reality’. As another speaker says, “That’s PR that doesn’t work because it isn’t based on any sort of integrity or truth, it is just somebody trying to mask and obscure”. This attempt to obscure may be the result of practitioners lacking the power to convince their leaders that ‘reality’ cannot be hidden. The speaker continues “[B]ad PR doesn’t work, and people can spot it and smell it”. Attempts to mask and obscure are represented as “bad PR” that creates a foul smell.

When I take up the speaker on the distinction between “good” and “bad PR”, the speaker says “I think people are often in positions where their backs are against the wall, and they have to have a line”. It seems that “often” practitioners are dealing with organisational discomfort. They are represented as people being punched into submission by circumstances, and it sounds uncomfortable. The solution is to “have a line” which is attempting to mask the source of organisational discomfort. The

attempt may not work, since people may be able to detect a foul smell. The speaker goes on to say, “it is debatable whether, if your back is against the wall, and you are starting from quite a weak position, whether going out with a strong anti-message is always right.” This suggests that the knee-jerk reaction of organisations, when faced with problems, is denial. When I observe that this is what happened in a case reported on at the recent CIPR conference, which we both attended, the speaker agrees and audibly sighs. The speaker is saying that blatant attempts to mask and obscure do not work. The sigh may be a reflection of the lack of power of practitioners to change the policy, or it may reflect a sense that many practitioners fail to understand how to deal with issues that cause discomfort.

Another speaker is more reticent. As an in-house practitioner, the speaker may be reluctant to talk about sources of discomfort within their organisation. “An aspect of PR that people don’t get to hear about isn’t the most sexy stuff, but it’s almost the most valuable stuff”. Practitioners apparently keep quiet about this aspect of their work, although or perhaps because it is so valuable. The speaker says that this means “sometimes keeping things out of the press, making those phone calls that will save the situation or the individual and get things back on track.” The individual may be the leader of the organisation, and the discomfort the practitioner is dealing with in these cases may be the leader’s own. This is a significant role for the leader and it may make the practitioner valuable at a very personal level. When asked if leaders hide behind public relations, the speaker says, “Sometimes it is about changing people’s opinion, and telling people things they don’t necessarily want to hear.” Dealing successfully with organisational discomfort, or particularly with discomfort relating to leaders personally, may mean that practitioners gain the power to influence decision-making.

“[T]here are people who, for whatever reason, don’t like what we do and who want to control it. If we don’t have relationships with them, and with the people that they’re trying to get to influence, we lose control of the factors that control our long-term commercial environment.” This is another speaker talking in unemotional terms about sources of discomfort. Dealing with people who “don’t like what we do” is seen as a matter of control. A little later, dealing with issues that make the organisation uncomfortable is seen as being “careful”. A practitioner who is seen as being able to control people who “don’t like what we do” is likely to be highly valued. Discussing later whether the practice is maturing, the speaker says, “I see more sensitivity to media coverage, maybe more nervousness about adverse media coverage that’s making them take an interest; particularly in an era in business when there are moves towards greater transparency”. It seems that organisational discomfort is on the increase, and that this may be due to demands for greater transparency. “There are lots of people, thankfully, who are scared of what we do, people for whom talking to the media is the most nerve-wracking thing on earth. And I’m very thankful for that, because it stops people doing stupid things.” The role that practitioners play in talking to the media about issues that cause discomfort appears to be valued by leaders.

“So is that what you do? You are delivering thought leadership? I would never put it like that. Does it have slight connotations of opinion management? Yes it does. Even manipulation? Yes. It starts going down that route. I wouldn’t use that term. It sounds a bit Orwellian to me. But is it actually what you do, regardless of what you call it? (pause) No (pause) Yes (pause) I’d come back to saying it’s about our reputation.” It

seems that organisations use practices that may be seen as Orwellian in dealing with issues that make them uncomfortable. Later the speaker says, “it’s part of our job to point out where the potential negative publicity, or not just publicity, where that lies. And that’s a fairly fundamental part of what we do.”

It seems that practitioners are often dealing with organisational discomfort, although they do not talk much about this aspect of their work. It may cause them personal discomfort. Although blatant attempts to obscure the source of discomfort do not work, they seem to be commonplace. These attempts are seen as “bad PR” that creates a foul smell. Either practitioners do not understand that these attempts do not work, or they lack the power to convince leaders to act otherwise. Sometimes the discomfort may be the leaders’ own, and dealing with it may make the practitioners personally valuable. Organisational discomfort seems to be on the increase, and this may be a result of demands for greater transparency. So public relations can benefit from the discomfort.

Where does our role begin and end?

Some practitioners may be reluctant to voice issues that make organisations uncomfortable. Others may be involved in questioning general management and ensuring that claims made are justified. One speaker seems to suggest that the term ‘corporate communications’ means dealing with organisational discomfort. Practitioners may be involved in giving ethical guidance to general management in situations that cause discomfort. The discomfort might be hard for practitioners to bear if they did not believe in what the organisation was doing.

“What you could say is, do you know what, guys, you’ve got a terrible reputation for customer service. Where does our role begin and end?” This consultant appears reluctant to voice issues that make clients uncomfortable, no matter how serious they may be. Another speaker looks at the issue of poor customer service differently. This speaker says that, if an organisation wishes to develop a good reputation, its leaders have to think about what needs to be done to merit that reputation. “So if you want a reputation for reliability in business practices, you have to be reliable”. This is explained as a much bigger task than merely creating an impression. If practitioners feel uncomfortable about even raising contentious issues, they are unlikely to be given this bigger task. The speaker says that public relations needs to be involved in questioning general management, and there could be a decision to make claims as part of a policy to raise standards. Making unsubstantiated claims would show that practitioners have their backs against the wall. It leads to a foul smell.

It sounds as if some practitioners are involved in questioning general management. Another speaker talks of making an organisation behave “responsibly and sensibly”. That is why this speaker uses the term ‘corporate communications’, because of “this sort of concept of corporacy”. This speaker seems to be saying that the term ‘corporate communications’ suggests dealing with organisational discomfort. Speaking of Max Clifford, the speaker says, “I don’t think he has any sense of morality, and I think it is important for us to have that”. This speaker seems to be saying that practitioners need to be able to give ethical advice to general management in situations that cause discomfort. The speaker goes on to say that “the only way that we can work effectively for any organisation or client is if we wholeheartedly believe,

totally believe in what they do and why they do it.” This suggests that practitioners might find it hard to bear the discomfort if they did not believe in what the organisation was doing.

Some practitioners may be reluctant to voice issues that make clients uncomfortable, no matter how serious they may be. It seems they see the role of public relations is to attempt to gloss over the discomfort instead of facing up to it. Not all speakers seem to think this way, and these see public relations as a much bigger task than merely creating an impression. This bigger task would mean questioning general management and ensuring that claims made can be justified. Some practitioners do seem to be involved in this way, giving ethical advice to general management in situations that cause discomfort. It seems that practitioners working in this way need to completely identify with the organisation they are working for. If they did not, practitioners might find it hard to bear the discomfort.

Discussion

My research problem is the apparent contradiction between the way that practitioners explain what they do, and what they actually do in their daily work. Practitioners appear to spend a great deal of their time dealing with organisational discomfort, although this is not acknowledged. Many seem to attempt to deal with it by trying to sweep it under the carpet, although this does not work. The attempts to mask the discomfort seem to lead to greater demands for transparency. This leads to more opportunities for public relations practitioners. They seem to cause some of the discomfort and to benefit from it, in the short term. In the longer term, the practice gains a reputation for spin, if not lying, that makes a foul smell. Of course, practitioners explain their work differently, as “managing” reputation or relationships. But these interviews provide evidence that practitioners do not necessarily have the power to confront leaders with information that might make them uncomfortable. Some have this kind of power, but they stand out from the crowd. For many, public relations seems to involve glossing over discomfort. This seems to extend to the way practitioners represent their own practice. Public relations itself is glossed over and represented as something that does not correspond to the everyday experience of most practitioners.

Public relations may have contributed to the postmodern crisis in representation (Bertens 1995) and it seems to be benefiting from it. Saussure argues that language constitutes ‘reality’. This thinking can be applied to public relations, suggesting that the practice creates a new ‘reality’ that is in the interest of organisations. This ‘reality’ masks the sources of organisational discomfort, and practitioners represent it as ‘reputation’. But the publics see through it and practitioners are left with their backs to the wall. Moving on to Derrida and deconstruction, public relations could be seen as at war with itself (Barry 1995) Representing public relations as something it is not adds to the discomfort carried by practitioners. Glossing over is seen as “bad PR” but it is acknowledged that this is often what happens. So “bad PR” is apparently commonplace. That seems to be partly why some of these interviewees sigh and pretend to laugh. Organisational discomfort seems to lead to personal discomfort.

Foucault “interrogates” the power in the discourses of organisations. Public relations could be seen as a ‘discursive practice’ which Barry (1995) argues can be seen as a

kind of thought control that forms a relationship between power and 'truth'. Public relations could be seen as the attempt by organisations to impose their view of the world in order to maintain their market position. It sounds Orwellian, as one interviewee said. Corporations that are larger than some nation states have the power to normalise their view of the world, and public relations is at the sharp end of this process. The publics also have power, and they seem to be ready to use it to reject this 'truth'. Public relations is between a rock and a hard place. The discomfort seems to be endemic.

Future research will focus on applying deconstruction of the language used among public relations practitioners and academics. This working paper is intended to lead to eventual publication in a journal. A brief version of this paper has appeared in the CIPR online journal *Profile*.

References:

- Barry, P. (1995) *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* Manchester University Press
- Berger, B. (2005) Power over, Power with, and Power to Relations: Critical reflections on public relations, the dominant coalition, and activism *Journal of Public Relations Research* 17 (1)
- Bertens, H. (1995) *The Idea of the Postmodern: A history* Routledge London
- Campbell, F.E., Herman, R.A., Noble, D. (2006) Contradictions in Reputation Management *Journal of Communication Management* 10 (2)
- Cleaver, Sir A. (2004) *Institute of Public Relations Powerful PR: A force for the future IPR National Conference 'Return on Public Relations: What do Chief Executive Officers Expect?'* 8 November
- Deleuze, G. (1986/1988) *Foucault* trans. S. Hand University of Minnesota Press USA
- Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds) (2000) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* Sage Publications CA USA 2nd edition
- Derrida, J. (1976) *Of Grammatology* John Hopkins University Press MD USA
- Dreyfus, H.L., Rabinow, P. (1982) *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* University of Chicago Press USA
- Kamuf, P. (Ed.) (1991: ix) *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. Harvester Wheatsheaf Hemel Hempstead
- Morris, M., Patton, P. (Eds) (1979) *Power and Norm: Notes in Power, Truth, Strategy* Final Publications Sydney
- Murray, K., White, J. (2005) CEO's views on reputation management *Journal of Communication Management* 9 (4) 348-358

Rabinow, P. (Ed) (1984) *The Foucault Reader* Pantheon New York

Sarup, M. (1993) *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Post-modernism* Harvester Wheatsheaf Hemel Hempstead 2nd edition

Stacey, R., Griffin, D. (Eds) (2006) *A Complexity Perspective on Researching Organisations: Taking Experience Seriously* Routledge

Toth, E.L., Heath, R.L. (Eds) (1992) *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Mahwah NJ USA