The construction of intended meanings: furthering understanding of the purpose of public relations

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Abstract

This paper reports on the first step in addressing the research question: is the primary purpose of public relations to have target publics construct an intended meaning in order to attain strategic goals. This research question stems from the tensions around the purpose of public relations in terms of my knowledge acquired as a senior practitioner and that which is presented in much of the academic literature of the public relations field. This research reports on an initial examination of public relations practice as presented in award winning campaign entry texts to determine whether the construction of intended meanings were central to the campaign’s purpose. The research also examined whether the campaigns intended outcomes were primarily aiming to achieve the commissioning entity’s goals or some other goal. This was a way of examining whether my own experiences had been atypical and would inform my further research direction. This project, although exploratory in nature only, found that my own experiences of practice where public relations activity was undertaken with the express intention of achieving the strategic goals of the entity for whom I was working was not atypical. Further, all campaigns can be interpreted as having worked to have target publics construct the intended meaning of the commissioning entity rather than any other meaning.

Keywords

public relations, construction of meaning, theory and practice
Introduction

This paper reports on the first step in addressing the research question: is the primary purpose of public relations to have target publics construct an intended meaning in order to attain strategic goals.

The research question stems from a quandary within which I find myself working in academia as a teacher and researcher in the field of public relations. This quandary has arisen from attempting to reconcile aspects of the academic literature with my own experiences working for many years as a public relations practitioner. During these years, without exception, all public relations activity I managed was undertaken with the express intention of achieving the strategic goals of the organisation or individual for whom I was working. Much of public relations academic literature, especially that relating to the purpose and definitions of the field, is at odds with my own experiences as a practitioner. Many definitions centre on mutual benefit or improving society as the purpose of public relations. Such definitions abound within public relations circles - in professional industry associations (e.g. CIPR, 2007; PRIA, 2009; PRSA, 1982), in many undergraduate textbooks and also in academic literature, for example, that the public relations function is about ensuring “inclusiveness of all voices that are affected by the organisation and thereby benefiting the publics as well as the organisation itself (Holtzhausen, 2002, p. 255), that it is to build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Ledingham, 2003), or that its “major role is to empower those with less power” (Grunig, 2006, p. 165). Public relations has also been defined as a rhetorical challenge in that “public relations is the management function that rhetorically adapts organisations to people’s interests and people’s interests to organisations by co-creating meaning and co-managing cultures to achieve mutually beneficial relationships” (Heath, 2001, p.36). Even Botan and Taylor’s (2004) vision for the co-creational perspective has mutual benefit as its underlying purpose.

These definitions did not define my own experiences of public relations as practiced. My own experiences aligned more with Maloney’s (2006, p.168) definition of public relations – “above all, it is communication designed to further the interests of its principals. They would not invest in PR if it were otherwise”. Hutton (1999) states that it is a common criticism of many academic definitions of public relations that they are “normative or prescriptive, rather than descriptive of public relations’ true function in contemporary commerce and politics” (p.201). This is the position in which I found myself – critical of academic definitions of public relations for the reasons Hutton suggested. I began to wonder whether my experience
as a practitioner, which spans some 20 years in sectors as varied as government, not-for profit, tourism, small business and financial services, was atypical. The research begins an examination of other examples of practice to begin to determine whether the campaigns I had undertaken as a practitioner differed in their underlying purpose of having target publics construct an intended meaning from other practitioners’ campaigns.

As an initial way of examining other practitioners’ campaigns I turned to a readily available source of reported campaign practice, that of the Public Relations Institute of Australia’s Golden Target Award database, publicly available online through the University of Technology, Sydney. I looked at 57 award entries that had won a national award in their category between 1999 and 2007. I determined whether there was a meaning that the commissioning entity, i.e. the company, organisation or individual, wanted their identified target publics to construct. I then determined, according to the information supplied in the award entry text, whether the campaign was successful in constructing the intended meaning. The findings of this exploratory research would inform which direction I took subsequent lines of inquiry.

Why look at meaning?

I agree with many other public relations scholars that the construction of meaning is central to public relations practice (Berger, 1999; Berger & Reber, 2006; Gordon, 1997; Gordon & Pellegrin, 2008; Heath, 2001, 2006; Leitch & Neilson, 1997; Taylor & Kent, 2006) and Berger’s (1999, p. 186) “tentative answer” to the question of why do organisations practice public relations at all best captures this centrality:

public relations provides organizations with dynamic and comprehensive methods and processes of intentional representation in contested sites in which information is exchanged, meaning constructed and managed, and consensus, consent, and legitimation gained or lost with others. (p.186)

This was a definition that resonated with both my own social constructionist epistemology and my experiences as a practitioner. Berger (1999) states that “representation refers to the purposeful expression of organizational voice(s) and appearance(s) to influence others” (p.186). This again resonated with my own experiences. I examined the award entries for evidence of the application of the elements of Berger’s definition; a) methods and processes of intentional representation, which could be said to comprise the practice of public relations and b) the contested sites in which information is exchanged, meaning constructed and
managed, and consensus, consent, and legitimation gained or lost with others, which could be
said to comprise the purpose of public relations. From my practitioner perspective, I always
viewed the environment in which I practiced public relations as a contested site, a site of
competing messages and factors where target publics were encouraged, through my
application of techniques and processes, to co-construct\(^1\) the intended meaning of the entity I
was commissioned to work for. I worked to have target publics construct meanings such as
donating organs after death was a good thing to do, that completing a census form was in the
country’s interest, that women could be excellent firefighters, that nursing offered wondering
career opportunities, that taking out a no frills mortgage with a particular institution would
save them money, that visiting a particular destination would revitalise a relationship and so
on. There was a meaning that the commissioning entities wanted their target publics to
construct rather than any other meaning, and my work was to facilitate this process.

In defining meaning, it is difficult to move beyond circular definitions, such as meaning is
what something means, and the term itself has more than one meaning in the academic
literature (Alasuutari, 1995) but Rosengren (2000, p. 59) explained meaning as the "whole
way in which we understand, explain, feel about, and react towards a given phenomenon".
This explanation of meaning seems particularly relevant to public relations. Wicks (2005)
believes that “mass communication research is rapidly moving beyond effects research into
what has become known as the meanings paradigm” (p. 333) and the academic literature
supports the notion that the public relations field is moving in tandem with this development
in mass communication research. For example, Gordon (1997) advanced that “public relations
is the active participation in social construction of meaning” (p.64) and asked the field to
consider the opportunities for reassessing and redefining the field using symbolic
interactionism which would cast the organisation as “one player among many in a larger
social dynamic that continually forms meanings” (p.64). Botan and Soto (1998) found deficits
in the traditional ways of explaining the construction of meaning in public relations and
advocated a consideration of Piercian semiotics as a way to “help reconceptualize a public as
an ongoing process of agreement upon an interpretation” (p.22). Leichty and Warner (2001)
stated that “public relations is first and foremost concerned with meaning” (p.61) and that
“meaning and interpretation are the central processes of all public relations activities” (p. 61).
Van Ruler’s (2005) description of the Heath’s Co-creation of Meaning Theory stated that

\(^1\) Given the current interpretations of the terminology of cocreation in the public relations literature at this time, I
have chosen to use the term co-construct rather than co-create.
meaning “is not an attribute of a message or a recipient but of the interaction itself” (p. 136). Other scholars have proposed an array of approaches such as Hall’s Articulation Model of Meaning (Moffit, 1994); a discourse approach to concepts of publics (Leitch & Neilson, 1997); cultural topoi (Leichty & Warner, 2001); dialogical theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002); sense-making (Walker, 2006); a Foucauldian perspective on public relations (Motion & Leitch, 2007); social constructionism (Gordon & Pellegrin, 2008) and sociodrama (Mickey, 2008). Although approaching the concept of meaning from different angles, all have the construction of meaning at their core.

The co-creational perspective, defined as one that

sees publics as co-creators of meaning and communication as what makes it possible to agree to shared meanings, interpretations and goals. This perspective is long term in its orientation and focuses on relationships among publics and organizations. Research is used to advance understanding and the perspective embraces theories that either explicitly share these values (e.g., relational approaches or community) or can be used to advance them. The major relationship of interest is between groups and organizations, and communication functions to negotiate changes in these relationships. (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652)

has emerged as a dominant perspective over the last decade. Botan and Taylor (2004, p.659) state that

the future of the field of public relations lies with whichever co-creationist model emerges as the most useful, the most theoretically valuable, and perhaps, the one that situates public relations theory as a foundational member of the field of communication.

Interestingly, Botan and Taylor’s (2004) vision for the co-creational perspective of public relations states there is more than the achievement of an organisation’s goals in its underlying purpose:

the cocreational perspective places an implicit value on relationships going beyond the achievement of an organizational goal. That is, in the cocreational perspective, publics are not just a means to an end (p. 652).
However, not all public relations scholars who work to further understanding of how the construction of meaning occurs in relation to public relations practice have fully embraced Botan and Taylor’s view of the “co-creational perspective”. Would it not be possible, if not always ethical, to overtly or covertly manipulate the process of co-creating meaning with publics? Could it be that any public relations activity, wherever it sat on the symmetrical-asymmetrical continuum, could still aim to have a target public construct an intended meaning and that this could be through a process of co-creation, albeit not how envisaged by Botan and Taylor (2004)? If the commissioning entity creates messages and introduces factors, that may or may not include opportunities for dialogue, into the environment of target publics and those target publics synthesise this and articulate the various messages and factors with their current understandings (Moffit, 1994) does this not warrant consideration as a version of co-creation? If publics ignore or resist a public relations practitioners efforts does this not also co-create a particular, if not an intended meaning? At the very least these questions place co-creational approaches to public relations into the wider social constructionist perspective.

**Methodology**

For this project, award winning entries into the Public Relations Institute of Australia’s Golden Target Awards were viewed as examples of what the public relations industry in Australia holds up to be best practice as judged by peers across the country. The award entries included in the data collection were 57 entries from the database that can be accessed via the University of Technology, Sydney library at [www.lib.uts.edu.au/gta/](http://www.lib.uts.edu.au/gta/) and that have been awarded a Golden Target Award between 1999-2007, the years that the database at the time of the data collection covered. This number of entry awards was arbitrarily selected by the researcher but represents all entries that were recorded as a winner and provided sufficient detail for the purposes of the research, i.e. executive summary; situational analysis; goals and objectives; research; target publics; communication strategy; implementation; results; and, evaluation. There were 58 entries recorded as winners but only 57 provided sufficient detail to work with. The sample provides a cross section of entries from across industry sectors and campaign types. It is not designed to be a representative sample but a sample of award entries judged by peers as being worthy of winning a national award. Not all entries that have won a Golden Target Award in this period are available on the database. The 57 selected award entries are all presented in the same template style. The award entries themselves were not unproblematic, as Jaques (2008) has stated:

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Inevitably, such “author generated” cases are prone to self-praise and wisdom after the event, and they tend to focus on successful outcomes (especially when the author is a consultant using an award program to promote work done for a client organization). More importantly they generally lack independent review and are deficient in objective analysis. (p. 195)

In acknowledging that the award entries are a retrospective narrativisation of the public relations activities undertaken by the entries’ authors, and would be composed in a way that showed the activities in the best light in the hope of winning an award, the entries also demonstrate what is valued in public relations practice and how public relations practitioners talk about or present their practice. The award entries do not necessarily describe accurately what “really” happened and “use discourse as a device to construct their version” of practice (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, p. 143). The award entries are used to examine what is valued by the professional association as demonstrated through its peer judging processes and to explore the research question.

This methodology takes an interpretative approach to data collection and analysis and the researcher does not claim to present empirical data that point to indisputable conclusions. The analysis was based on an examination of all aspects of the award entry texts including the stated goals, objectives, strategies and tactics and other entry content. The researcher has attempted to glean what the strategic intent of the award entry was by way of determining through discourse analysis if there was an overarching meaning that the client desired the target public to construct. Discourse analysis is embedded in a strong social constructionist epistemology and has been variously described as theoretical perspective, methodology, method, or as a form of scholarship (Nikander, 2008). For this project, discourse analysis is being used to interrogate the nature of public relations practice by dealing with how actions and/or meanings are intended to be constructed through the award entry texts which have been authored by public relations practitioners. An examination of whether there was evidence in each award entry of an intended meaning that was trying to be constructed was undertaken. If this evidence was present, a summary statement of what meaning the award entry intended to construct was formulated (see Appendix 1). The results of this task were then examined in light of the research question. Indicators within the award entries were identified that pointed to the “dynamic and comprehensive methods and processes of intentional representation” that Berger (1999, p.186) has stated comprise the practice of public relations. When I interpreted and recorded an intended meaning to be constructed by target publics, the results and evaluation sections of the entries were examined to determine if practitioners reported that the desired outcome had occurred.
In determining the purpose of the campaigns in the research sample I could have looked at goals, objectives or communications strategies and/or tactics but it became apparent that there was not a standardised application of these terms in the award entries and like could not be compared with like. Similar problems with category content classifications in the PRIA Golden Target award entries have been reported by other researchers who have used this data in their research (Xavier, Johnston & Patel, 2005). As a way of taking the project forward, I determined by synthesising the descriptions written in the executive summaries, situational analyses, goals and objectives, communication strategies and tactics sections of each award entry in the sample whether or not there was an intended meaning that the commissioning entity wanted their identified target publics to construct.

The content of the awards that was deemed to point to efforts to have target publics construct the intended meaning of the commissioning entity (content indicators) was coded according to themes emerging from the data. The data were revisited several times and over fifty coding themes emerged. These coding themes were then thematically grouped into categories that indicated techniques and processes used to construct meaning in a public relations campaign context. The categories were:

a) Building awareness or understanding of something
b) Direct engagement with publics/audiences/stakeholders
c) Informing or educating
d) Issue management
e) Marketing (product/distribution/price), sales and advertising
f) Media management
g) Other various themes unable to be grouped into above
h) Persuading or convincing
i) Positioning and perception management

**Limitations of this research approach**

The collection of award entry texts which comprised the data for this project was subject to only one form of analysis and it is clear that this data lends itself to multiple analytic angles and points of interrogation. The research looks at practice through the award entry narratives and it is acknowledged that further research would be needed to look at award winning campaign practice through other lenses to mitigate some of my personal biases gained through my research activities and extensive experience as a practitioner, or before conclusive rather than indicative findings could be argued. It is acknowledged however that my experience as a practitioner also brings specific insights which could be advantageous.
The award entries are national award winners in their category and are acknowledged by the Australian public relations industry as examples of best practice. Berger (2005) highlighted the essential dissonance in public relations practice and how a practitioner’s role and “whom one serves or how one is defined” (p.23) creates difficulties in determining “what public relations will be and how it will be used in an organization” (p. 24). This indicates that a sample of practice descriptions detailing something less than best practice or any other collection of data detailing practice might result in different findings.

It is also acknowledged that this research does not examine public relations practice from the perspectives of publics and does not presume to know the intent, wherewithal or any other characteristic of the publics who engaged or did not engage with the various public relations campaigns which are described in the award entries. Reports of campaign results and evaluation data included in the award entries have been authored by award entrants who are public relations practitioners and the researcher relied on the fact that the entries had been through the judging processes which would have confirmed the veracity of information presented. This project is the preliminary step in what is envisaged to become a larger study and does not presume to be more than this.

Results

There were no instances where an entity could be identified as not wanting target publics to construct an intended meaning for the primary benefit of the commissioning entity. The target publics constructed the meanings intended for them by the public relations practitioners in all cases examined (see Appendix 1 for details). Of the 57 award entries examined all reported success in their campaigns. Success was measured and reported in a variety of ways by award entrants but could be broadly classified into four major areas:

1. Media content analysis results
2. Stakeholder perception analysis results
3. Reported support from third parties
4. Increased profile or level of engagement from publics

The following statements in table 1 are taken from a random selection of the award entries sample gives some insight into language used by practitioners in reporting success and into how award entry results were presented:

Table 1:
### 1.1. Media content analysis

- “no negative media or community comment was received” (Marcom, 2007)
- “100% of key messages in monitored media” (Rowland, 2004)
- “The influence of CAMRA’s campaign is clear from a review of the sample media clips” (CAMRA 2007).
- “88% of print and online news articles contained two or more of KRC key messages” (Rowland, 2007)
- “Extensive media coverage highlighted the high calibre of Cryosite’s directors and the nature of the company’s business” (Westbrook, 2003)
- “media exposure was enormous” (Smail, 2005)
- “secured enormous media coverage” (Turnbull Porter Novelli, 2001)
- “64% of all media items reported positive messages” (Cox Inall, 1999).  
- “Media interest in the program was overwhelming”…“There was only one media article that focussed on the issue of companies ‘paying for’ the NHF Tick symbol and expressed cynicism” (Reed Weir, 2006)

### 1.2. Stakeholder perception analysis

- “research undertaken 3 months into the positioning campaign showed improved perceptions/awareness” (Rowland, 2005)
- “no objections were received…inquiries instead related to offers of assistance to locate existing bores…” (Marcom, 2007)
- “Interviews with members and an analysis of media coverage after the campaign showed that members were pleased” (WCG Public Relations, 1999).
- “the Mufti of Australia…believed the campaign set up an atmosphere in Baghdad conducive to negotiating successfully with the kidnappers” (Smail, 2005)
- “Following the launch, two-thirds of employees surveyed believed the Intranet was critical to performing their jobs and saved them time” (IBM, 2004)
- “Through this forum IBM has had an opportunity to directly address misconceptions about its relevance to the SME sector and positively build its brand as a SME-centric organisation” (Text 100, 2006)

### 1.3. Support from third parties:

- “third party endorsements from NT government and Opposition” (Roland, 2005)
- “the op-ed pieces in favour of therapeutic cloning heavily out-weighed the anti-lobby” (CAMRA, 2007)
- “according to external consultants…the Department performed outstandingly” (Department of Water, 2007).
“a survey showed 100% of DFMs believed that tailored local media releases play an important role in raising the bank’s profile” (Turnbull Porter Novelli, 2001)


“launched…with high level political endorsement” (Cox Inall, 1999)

1.4. Increased profile or level of engagement:

• “Invited to sit on two project teams and one panel” (Rowland, 2004)
• “recruited 12 new members” (WCG Public Relations, 1999)
• “The percentage of respondents who had come to the speedway with their families increased from 64% to 77%” (Creative Territory, 2007)
• “Oversubscribed prospectus a direct outcome of a successful IPO campaign” (Westbrook, 2003).
• “83% of all enquiries had come from people in this target group” (Northern Territory University, 2003)
• “Greater interest in and concern about the fate of Douglas Wood among Iraqis than had been evident on previous similar occasions” (Smail, 2005).
• “87% of people who used the call centre rang because they had ‘read an article’” (Turnbull Porter Novelli, 2001)

All award entries showed evidence of attempting to scope the pre-campaign terrain and to gain understanding of target publics. The content of the various sections of the award entries including situational analysis summaries, research and executive summaries of the award entries indicate that target publics had not created these specific intended meanings, or had not created them to a sufficient degree, prior to the public relations activities instigated by the award entrants. All award entries reported introducing a range of factors into the environments of their target publics. These factors included a variety of initiatives ranging from created events, media content, publications, opportunities for discussion, direct contact, product sampling, sponsorship of events, product or service modifications, paid advertising, submissions, promotional handouts and combinations of these. The content indicators coded into the thematic categories showed media management to be the most prevalent technique or process used:

a) Media management (including media relations processes and techniques; media training; spokesperson selection) - (28% of content indicators)

b) Direct engagement with publics/audiences/stakeholders (17% of content indicators)

c) Building awareness or understanding of something (12% of content indicators)

d) Positioning and/or perception management (12% of content indicators)
Discussion and examples

The selection of the introduced factors, techniques and processes seemed in most cases directly linked to the reported findings of the campaign research activities. Attempts to reach target audiences with constructed key messages either through media channels or through direct engagement predominated for the purposes of building awareness/understanding or to intentionally position something in the campaign. The following two examples are provided to shed light on the link between research, strategy and the implementation of the various factors – all award entries showed similar links. For example, in one award entry, call no. 2000 A17, research findings were reported as:

“There was strong interest in taking advantage of free prisoner labour, which could help appeal to, and help overcome opposition from, those with prejudices or fears about having criminals in their neighbourhood… participating in prisoner rehabilitation would not be a strong selling point… people’s strongest concerns related to fear of the unknown about prisoners and the prison system” (Ministry for Justice, 2000)

The communication strategy subsequently focused on altering the usual government processes and aimed to:

establish one [a process] where enough interest was created throughout regional Western Australia, to inspire bids for the right to host prisoner work camps. Essentially the challenge was to make work camps highly sought-after opportunities rather than an imposition on a community (Ministry for Justice, 2000).

The factors introduced into the environments of the target publics (local shires, councillors and communities; local residents in general vicinity of proposed camp sites; key community representatives - community spirited opinion leaders; local community groups; WA Municipal Association; Members of Parliament; news media; WA Prison Officers Union; prison officers; minimum-security prisoners) (Ministry for Justice, 2000) - were tailored
according to the identified needs of each group, e.g. “tailored media releases…tailored information brochures…tailored video presentation” (Ministry for Justice, 2000). In this award entry it was presented that target publics had constructed a particular meaning about prisoner work camps which was negative and did not bode well for the introduction of the camps, that public relations activity aimed to have target publics construct a different meaning, one that repositioned camps as a positive asset to a community – the intended meaning of the Ministry for Justice – and that this was reported as having been achieved.

In another example award entry (call no. 2005 A4), Alcan’s research had identified that some stakeholders “wrongly thought Alcan only recycled aluminium cans and made alfoil” (Rowland, 2005). This lack of understanding amongst stakeholders, including key political decision-makers, would clearly not assist Alcan in achieving its stated goal of helping “secure stakeholder approval of the Gore refinery expansion, while managing expectations” (Rowland, 2005).

The strategy developed a clear positioning for Alcan in Australia, reinforcing its credibility and capability. It positioned the expansion as beneficial and proactively managed issues that could potentially impact stakeholder perceptions (Roland, 2005).

The stated strategic approach was to “communicate positioning via national communication strategy” with the rationale being to improve perceptions, build reputation and ensure consistent messaging (Roland, 2005). Alcan employed tactics that would help stakeholders create the meaning intended for them – that Alcan was credible and capable, positioning “the expansion as beneficial”. The results of the campaign reported that

“Alcan in Australia went from a company with little profile and perceived by some to only recycle cans and make alfoil to an acknowledged leader in Australia’s aluminium industry and a significant contributor to the Australian economy (Rowland, 2005).

The strategies and tactics employed by practitioners on all entries clearly aimed to achieve intended outcomes of the commissioning entity, however some award entries did show evidence of aiming for mutual benefit, for example the award entry by Rio Tinto (call no. 2006 C16 – 2) had four stated goals, namely:

- To assist in facilitating a stronger and more sustainable Western Australian community.
- To enable Rio Tinto to share business success, skills, knowledge and resources.
• To achieve reputational benefits for Rio Tinto in Western Australia.
• To assist Rio Tinto to engage with stakeholders outside of the usual channels of communications.

These goals could be interpreted as seeking to deliver mutual benefit to both Rio Tinto and the communities in which the company operates in Western Australia but depending on the interpreter’s viewpoint, could also be alternatively interpreted either as a genuine commitment to doing good in the community, as a way of “paying off” communities who might otherwise resist the company’s activities, or as a way of connecting with new business opportunities. It could be argued that a company like Rio Tinto would need to invest in the communities in which it operates in order to maintain the communities’ support for its activities. If this can be done in a way that delivers “reputational benefits” and access to networks “outside the usual channels of communications” it would seem logical from a business perspective for a company to proceed in such a way.

The evidence in all the award entries examined suggests that public relations was not primarily intended to create mutual understanding or deliver mutual benefits for organisations and publics alike. This does not mean that publics did not benefit as the result of any campaign but that the primary purpose of the public relations activity was to help the commissioning entity achieve its wider goals – to have target publics construct the intended meaning. There was little evidence of what has been defined in the public relations academic literature as dialogical or co-creational approaches to the construction of meaning although some award entry content was unclear as to what processes such as consultation involved. This is an area that would be best addressed in further research, perhaps through interviews with the practitioners who managed the campaigns and ideally with members of publics targeted in the campaigns.

There is little ambiguity evident in the language used in the award entries texts which indicates a clear strategic intent to have publics construct the intended meaning of the entity commissioning the public relations activity rather than any other meaning. This can be seen throughout the award entry texts and especially in the reporting of results and in evaluation statements (see Table 1). There is substantial evidence that there are attempts by the entity commissioning the public relations to have publics adopt the understanding or position intended for them, or to carry out an intended behaviour. Even when an entry outlined a goal that was seemingly in the public interest, such as in award entry call no. 2007 C6-26 where there was a clear desire by the Council to get the solution to a traffic problem right and extensive consultative opportunities were arranged, the intent behind the processes and
techniques employed could be interpreted as strategic. A council that is consultative and seen as responding to community preferences is more likely to be elected, and a solution put forwarded by a majority group of road users and ratepayers is less easily criticised than one unilaterally decided upon by the council.

**Conclusion**

It would be premature to answer the research question based only on the results of this initial exploratory study. However indications are that my own experiences of practice where public relations activity was undertaken with the express intention of achieving the strategic goals of the entity for whom I was working was not atypical. The results, whilst not at all conclusive, seem to support Maloney’s (2006, p.168) definition that “above all, it [public relations] is communication designed to further the interests of its principals” rather than other definitions espousing mutual benefit. The content of the examined award entry texts demonstrate what Berger (1999) called the “dynamic and comprehensive methods and processes of intentional representation in contested sites” (p.186). As such a tentative answer to the research question is that on the basis of this initial data analysis it would seem that the primary purpose of public relations is to have target publics construct the intended meaning of the entity commissioning the public relations in order to attain strategic goals. The indications are that most commissioning entities in this study are undertaking public relations to achieve benefits primarily for themselves. This does not preclude public relations activity delivering benefits to publics but it appears that this process involves the commissioning entity getting identified publics to construct their intended meaning rather than any other meaning.

This paper does not claim to have captured the “truth” of public relations but instead the author has aimed to produce what Gray (2003, p.21) calls a “version of the truth…which we present modestly for others to consider”. It begins the exploration of whether the field of public relations should consider that the construction of meaning for strategic purposes is at the core of public relations activities such as campaigns. The initial results indicate that further research is warranted and it is hoped that this could eventually contribute to the development or enhancement of theory. I believe that if the purpose of public relations becomes clearer the debate as to who holds the power and wherewithal to influence and control the meaning co-construction process, and the ethics of doing so, could take place. The popular debates could move from “is public relations all about spin?” to examinations of how and for what purposes intended meanings are being constructed by parties.
More research is needed to shed light on the methods and processes of meaning construction and co-construction/cocreation used in the practice of public relations so that the findings could assist both practitioners and critics of public relations to better present their cases and pinpoint areas of concern. The understandings gleaned from such research could provide insights into how decisions are made to intentionally represent an organisation or an organisation’s view. This could assist organisations in further refining public relations programs. It could also assist the wider citizenry in being able to decode public relations practice and representations. Such research could also underpin the development of ways in which practice can be taught and critiqued in academic settings. It could continue to move the public relations research agenda to one that considers wider societal and cultural aspects in a global context and this can only be to the benefit of the quest for social equity and social justice.

Appendix 1 – Intended Meaning to be constructed by target publics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Call no.*</th>
<th>Summary of intended meaning to be co-created by target publics</th>
<th>Achieved?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005A4</td>
<td>Positioning Alcan as credible and capable in terms of the proposed development.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003B7</td>
<td>To enhance the meaning of Australia Day</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004G2</td>
<td>The Trust was credible and worthy of support, was not like other agencies and was an important adviser to government</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 C6 -25</td>
<td>That groundwater was a logical, safe and well tested alternative water supply and testing was not wasting water</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 C2 -4</td>
<td>That therapeutic cloning has the best chance of success, Australia should not to fall behind in this and it was a matter for a conscience vote.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 C2 -2</td>
<td>With increasing need for services with the aging population the Ear and Eye Hospital are best geographically situated to meet that need</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999 E 16</td>
<td>QGGA is a member-oriented, service-providing organisation with members’ needs at the forefront</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 C17-3</td>
<td>Speedway is great family fun and is exciting to watch – come and try it</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 C3 -9</td>
<td>The closure is necessary, the company needs your ongoing support until the closure, and the company will support employees through the process and will continue to value all stakeholders.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999 E 8</td>
<td>That the process was valid and worth participating in, that the changes were worthwhile and that money was not being wasted.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 C7 - 7</td>
<td>That the move to the new department was worthwhile and would benefit all, that the feelings of employees were being considered.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 E 3</td>
<td>This is a new business that is worth investing in.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003 G 11</td>
<td>That time is passing by and people don’t have to wait until next year to enrol</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005 J3</td>
<td>To portray Douglas Wood in a manner which might influence his captors to free him unharmed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 G15</td>
<td>That the credibility and appeal of Elders other business interests were now available in the new banking venture and that deposits and investments were invited from rural and metropolitan populations.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 C4</td>
<td>Water Project Management Group (WPMG) and its activities were credible and reliable and that staff should accept, adopt and promulgate key messages about the White Paper reforms to DPI stakeholders.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 D6</td>
<td>The Summit is a unique opportunity for growers from throughout the country to participate as a national group in a consultative forum on the direction and vision for AWB International – The AWB deserves ongoing support</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999 B3</td>
<td>That BMP was the way to go for cotton growers and that cotton growers were being responsible to the wider community</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C15 - 6</td>
<td>Eggs won’t raise your cholesterol and previous ideas about eggs doing so have been proven wrong.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 E2</td>
<td>This is a new product delivering good returns at some risk but is better than previous CDOs offered previously by others.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 C4</td>
<td>The best way to get info and communicate is through the intranet – even though it was previously unwieldy it is now good.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C10 - 3</td>
<td>IBM is not just about big business but also very relevant to SMEs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C7 - 2</td>
<td>Star City is taking staff communication needs seriously and management is committed to getting it right.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C15 - 3</td>
<td>That moving the maternity unit it the right thing to do and that people can be confident in the services of the new unit.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C1 -</td>
<td>Canberra is more than just a boring government town, is a great</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C4 - 3</td>
<td>Snack items may not be safe now and we’re protecting you until all is okay – come back and buy then - Masterfoods is grateful for your understanding</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 B13</td>
<td>That McDonalds is making a valuable contribution to the 2000 Olympic Games.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C9 - 1</td>
<td>This state government selective high school can meet the educational needs of your gifted and talented children and you should apply.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999 C7</td>
<td>Nippy’s will do all it can to protect the public and if Nippy’s has done anything wrong they’re open to due process and inspection. Then, Nippy’s is okay to drink again.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C2 - 4</td>
<td>Bus services were urgently needed in the outer suburbs for social, economic and environmental reasons.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999 A11</td>
<td>ORTA is providing effective Olympic public transport arrangements - fostering a public and media conclusion that “it’s not as I thought it would be”</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C6 - 5</td>
<td>We really want to get the best outcome for the hospital development and we want your input.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001 A20</td>
<td>Just because Australia was disease free, farmers couldn’t be complacent and must remain vigilant.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 B14</td>
<td>If you were abused in an Irish institution you can /are invited to seek redress from the Irish government</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007 C4-1</td>
<td>That the restoration is a complex task but that the companies are doing all they can to restore power ASAP and are working around the clock to do so.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006 C16 - 2</td>
<td>Rio Tinto is committed to facilitating a stronger and more sustainable Western Australian community by establishing and supporting a Future Fund</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002 A17</td>
<td>This was a special visit, a positive for SA and everyone (public, media, venues etc) would get an appropriate level of access to the royal couple</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 H25</td>
<td>Only chance to legally own Gallipoli sand - the merchandise relevant and desirable, particularly given that for many, a trip to</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>G11</td>
<td>Anzac Cove is not feasible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>C9</td>
<td>Sentek is a leader and innovator in research and development and has a great product coming onto the market to help farmers manage salinity that has the backing of scientists. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>C6-26</td>
<td>This journal is worth subscribing to as it is specifically tailored for your interests and tastes. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>F8</td>
<td>Brisbane Council wants to get this right and need user input. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>C11-3</td>
<td>Shell is quickly responding, is investigating, cooperating with authorities and will do all it can to ensure it doesn’t happen again. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>H8</td>
<td>That rodeo is fun and exciting suitable for extreme sports lovers and families, will be run in the main arena at RAS show and will be humane to animals. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>A16</td>
<td>Southbank Tech is cool and could provide the training you want. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>E3</td>
<td>Vote for the merger as this is the best way forward for building society customers. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>A16</td>
<td>The Beverly Uranium mine is good for Australia and local communities. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>F2</td>
<td>You can trust the Panadol brand and that the company will do the right thing throughout this crisis – returning the product to the shelves when absolutely safe to do so. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>F5</td>
<td>Tampa did what it had to do according to International Safety of Life at Sea convention. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>C13-3</td>
<td>Telstra is committed to regional Australia and is supporting this competition for aspiring country musicians in order to launch their careers. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>A6</td>
<td>Graffiti is not cool, will not be tolerated and will be removed. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>C9-11</td>
<td>Twinings has the best teas, the best tea blenders and is worth purchasing. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>D3</td>
<td>Come to the Olive Festival and try olive products and find out what you can do the olives in a beautiful farm environment. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>F5</td>
<td>That welfare and counselling services were available and it was acceptable and normal to access them in the situation. That the Government was responding appropriately. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>D8</td>
<td>WA farmers need help and deserve assistance. WAFF is doing all it can to get this assistance. Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A work camp is an opportunity for a regional town to get vital community work done and for prisoners to repay their debt to society.

BHP wants to get cross-cultural education right and will be guided by the local communities as to what should be included.

Farming families affected by drought need assistance as they are doing it tough – shopping at Woolworths will help farmers.

*Call nos. are those listed on the database of award entries at [www.lib.uts.edu.au/gta/](http://www.lib.uts.edu.au/gta/) and can be used to retrieve the award entries included in the study.

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