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The Actualities of Public Relations Practice at an Eastern Ontario University: *A Quasi-ethnographic Study*

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Abstract

Although various studies have used ethnographic techniques to examine different concepts, contexts, and practices in public relations (Sriramesh, 2000; Daymon & Hodges, 2009), none of these studies ethnographically examined the culture within which public relations is practiced, and discourse is produced in a college or university context. This quasi-ethnographic study aims to: (1) produce an account of the core aspects of the culture within which public relations is practiced at a university in Eastern Ontario and (2) identify what PR model best represents the PR practice there. To collect data for this study, I conducted e-mail interviews with five public relations participants at the university under investigation to collect data for this study. The data collected was about the groups' routines, practices, and behaviors that shape their experience and facilitate producing relevant discourse. I also collected some genres and documents. The findings showed that (1) collaboration characterized the culture within which PR performs its duties and activities and produces relevant discourse, and (2) the two-way asymmetrical model best represents the PR practice in the university examined. Besides filling the gap identified here, the study contributes to theory and practice in the field. It benefits those who teach public relations writing and the institution itself as it evaluates how excellent the PR practice in that institution is.

Keywords: educational public relations, ethnography, culture, social constructionism, activity theory

1. Introduction

PR is a cultural activity open to different possible meanings and composed by the context within which it is practiced. Thus, investigating the production of meaning in public relations and what it means to be a PR practitioner requires examining the relationship between public relations and the culture within which it is practiced (L'Etang, Hodges, & Pieczka, 2012).

For L'Etang (2011), digging deeply into how practitioners make sense of public relations and what characterizes the daily life of PR people requires more ethnographically inspired research. L'Etang (2012) claimed that research of this nature (ethnographic research) could deliver a broader understanding of the practice and produce new concepts and theories in public relations, and L'Etang, Hodges, and Pieczka (2012) highlighted that ethnography as a methodological approach could explore PR as a cultural practice that is constantly formed and modified by communities, groups, and individuals in their rhetorical and discursive actions.

Although ethnography has not been broadly embraced in PR (Everett & Johnston, 2012; L'Etang, 2012), some studies have used ethnographic techniques to examine different concepts, contexts, and practices in PR, such as the study by Sriramesh (2000) in which the author investigated public relations in Indian contexts and the study by Daymon and Hodges (2009) in which they ethnographically studied public relations in Mexico City. However, none of these studies ethnographically examined the culture within which PR is practiced in a college or university context (in a higher education institution context). The importance of this quasi-ethnographic study lies, besides filling the gap identified here, in the contribution it makes to both theoretical and practical aspects of the PR domain, as it aims to produce an account of the culture within which public relations is practiced and an account of the discourse produced at a university in Eastern Ontario. The study will illustrate how PR practitioners in that university collaborate on discourse production. Moreover, the study will benefit PR writing instructors as it will explore the discourse created in educational institutions; it will help the institution being studied itself as it will evaluate how excellent its PR practice is. To that end, this study is expected to find answers to the research questions (RQs) below:

1) What characterizes the culture within which public relations is practiced at a university in Eastern Ontario?

2) What is the nature of the discourse produced by the members of the PR group studied here?

3) What PR model best represents the PR practice in the university under investigation?

This study claims that the members of the PR group working for the university examined here perform their duties and activities and produce news releases, pitches, feature stories, advisories, official statements, bios, and backgrounders within a culture of collaboration and the two-way asymmetrical model of PR reflects their practice.

In what follows, I will provide a conceptual background on PR, culture, and discourse; review the literature relevant to the study; discuss the theoretical concepts used to orient inquiry and analysis here; and describe the study methodology. Later in the paper, I will display and analyze the study results, and finally, I will end up with the conclusions drawn and the study implications.

2. Conceptual Background on PR, Culture, and Discourse

Goodall, Jr. (1994) defined ethnography as describing or representing in words what you as a researcher had lived through when your stated objective was to study a culture, which constitutes the same matrix within which people develop ideas and perform actions. As a loaded term, Fetterman (2010) indicated that the term culture can be viewed from either an ideational or a materialist perspective, and ethnographers need to explore both to give a comprehensive understanding of cultures and subcultures. From an ideational view, culture encompasses beliefs, ideas, and knowledge that characterize a social group (Strauss & Quinn, 1997), and from a materialist perspective, it relates to the group's observable lifestyle, behavioral patterns, and customs (Murphy & Margolis, 1995; O'Reilly, 2008). This research paper addresses both the materialist and ideational perspectives of culture. Goodall, Jr. (1994) described this sort of culture as a whole that encompasses routines, meanings, and values influencing individual experience, and Everett and Johnston (2012) portrayed it as a system of common knowledge that is socially communicated over time among the members of an organization.

Lemke (1995) defined discourse as the social act of originating meanings through symbolic systems in a given setting. Wodak and Meyer (2001) perceived it as a social action that offers a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the institution(s), social structure(s), and situation(s) that shape it.

This study adopts Heath's (2005) definitions regarding PR and a PR practitioner. Heath defines PR as a professional practice (besides being an academic discipline) that is concerned with establishing and managing effective two-way communication between an entity (organization, company, university, etc.) and its publics on whom its success and failure depend and PR practitioners as problem solvers, advisors (who advise the management of an entity on how to best fit into its surroundings), and as "tacticians and technicians" (p. 680) who craft and design communication tools such as news releases, newsletters, investor reports, fact sheets, issue backgrounders, fundraising campaigns, and publicity and promotion efforts.

3. Literature Review

Ethnography has rarely been used in public relations research (Sriramesh, 2000; Daymon & Hodges, 2009; Everett & Johnston, 2012; L'Etang, 2012). Pieczka was the first to highlight, in her 1997 article, the significance of ethnography in studying the everyday life of PR practitioners (L'Etang, 2012). In the following paragraphs, I will review the literature informed by ethnographic approaches in public relations and adjacent disciplines.

In his mixed-method study, Sriramesh (2000) distributed questionnaires to PR managers in 18 Indian organizations and conducted participant observations to explore the nature and context of PR practice in these organizations. Sriramesh employed Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of PR practice to analyze the data collected. Interestingly, the results obtained from his ethnographically collected data showed that the press agentry/publicity model was primarily used by the 18 organizations studied.

In another mixed-method study, Sleurs and Jacobs (2005) investigated how a PR office in Belgium's central bank produced its press releases. To that end, the authors used ethnographic tools to gather information about what PR practitioners in the bank under study do when they write press releases. Sleurs and Jacobs concluded that pre-formulation was central to writing press releases, and their conclusion was remarkably consistent with the arguments made in previous corpus-based studies.

In their organizational ethnography, Everett and Johnston (2012) explored how the culture within which the employees of the Red Cross Queensland work impacts their perceptions regarding the organizational reputation. For the authors, organizational ethnographies examine individuals organized around prescriptive objectives and formalized rules meant to govern the individuals' relations and behaviors—this makes them different from traditional ethnographies. As a result, Everett and Johnston's study claimed that because of the influential role of cultural selection in shaping the values and beliefs within an organization, PR practices, and understandings are influenced by cultural selection as much as they are by the recognized imperatives of the surroundings.

Informed by the ethnographic approach, Daymon and Hodges (2009) examined the cultural context surrounding the work environment of PR practitioners in Mexico City to develop connections with individuals belonging to the professional culture, conceptualizing the world through its participants' lens and catching something of the interactive processes that constitute public relations culture. The authors concluded that the cultures that distinguish the sites examined impinged upon selectivity at each phase of the examination, and culture impacted the relationships that connect researchers with subjects as they interacted to co-construct meaning regarding the subject under investigation.

The studies reviewed above relate somehow to the study at hand. For instance, Sriramesh's (2000) ethnographic study employed Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models of PR practice to uncover how excellent the practice was in the 18 Indian organizations he examined, and this study explores which model matches the practice of the members of the PR group. Sleurs and Jacobs (2005) explored how PR practitioners at a central bank in Belgium produced press releases. This study examines the culture within which press releases are produced at a university in Eastern Ontario. Like this study, Johnston and Everett's (2012) study and Daymon and Hodges' (2009) study (informed by the ethnographic approach) focused on specific groups of people and their cultures.

4. Theoretical Framework

Over the past decade, PR scholars have drawn on sociological and cultural theorists to better understand the socio-cultural context within which PR is practiced (Edwards & Hodges, 2011). To orient inquiry and analysis in this study, I will draw upon a combined theoretical framework that combines activity theory, social constructionism, the social theory of genre, and Grunig and Hunt's (1984) PR models.

The employment of genre theory will help in exploring the genres generated by the group being examined, the knowledge that these genres produce, and their intended purposes; social constructionism will help in uncovering the core aspects of the culture in which the public relations discourse is created; activity theory will help in discovering who is doing what, why, and how; and finally the Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models will help in identifying the model that best represents the PR practice in the university examined here.

Generally, genre studies, as a form of situated discourse analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 2004), center on these three facets of discourse: organization, contextualization, and textualization of lexicogrammar. For Zhou (2012), regardless of the different approaches and orientations, genre theory typically views a genre as a type of communicative event characterized by shared communicative purposes within a specified community. Zhou describes genres as well-structured and standardized constructs that have been typically identified based on their specific moves, and for Swales (l998), genres' communicative purposes are typically associated with rhetorical moves. Dudley-Evans and John (as cited in He, 2006) describe a 'move' as a part that relates to the creator's aim and the content being conveyed.

In an interview with the Composition Forum Journal on the genre as a social action, Miller said that the concept of 'genre as a social action' closely resembles Cathy Schryer's depiction of genre as 'regulated improvisational strategies' (Dryer, 2015). Miller also mentioned that she hesitated to change 'is' to 'as' in the phrase 'as a social action,' emphasizing that the type of investigation pursued determines which description to be used by the inquirer. For Miller, a sound genre definition should emphasize the social act it aims to accomplish rather than its form and content. Miller (2015) perceives genre as follows: (a) a typical rhetorical response to a recurring rhetorical event, (b) a pragmatic action, (c) a significant social act, and (d) a means of mediating between the creator's intended end and receivers' social needs; and Smart (1997) views genre as an all-encompassing rhetorical strategy generated collaboratively, by community members to produce knowledge vital to their intended purposes.

The second theory in the combined framework used here is social constructionism. Journet (as cited in Smart, 1997) claims that social constructionism's core assertion is that knowledge is created rather than discovered by groups rather than individuals—meaning socially constructed. Similarly, McEwan (2004) argues that social constructionism posits that all knowledge, including scientific and historical knowledge, is significantly influenced by the preconceptions and biases of the persons who possess it and the society in which they live.

For Smart (1997), social constructionism is more than just a theoretical assertion; it spans various domains and encompasses many assumptions. Expanding on the key assumptions and concepts of social constructionism, Bruffee (1986) points out that it views realities, like information, texts, knowledge, etc., as linguistic entities generated by social groups. Similarly, Sullivan (1995) emphasizes that social constructionism regards realities as products of consensus reached through collective discourse.

The third theory used here is activity theory. Its roots can be traced back to the writings of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Engels, Vygotsky, Leont'ev, and Luria. For Engestrom (1999), activity theory has become a multidisciplinary and global theory.

Hasan and Kazlauskas (2014) argue that the theory is about who is engaging in what activity, for what reasons, and in what manner, and it offers researchers a framework to understand human activities better.

Fortunately, numerous researchers have used this theory to examine the discourse produced within organizations (Smart, 2003; El-Astal, 2024). From this perspective, workplace genres, such as the ones created by the PR department being studied here, are viewed as a locally (culturally and historically) situated sphere of collective effort where learning, knowing, and thinking are shared among numerous individuals to accomplish the workplace's intended objectives.

Finally, the study utilizes Grunig and Hunt's (1984) PR models to understand the reality of public relations in the university under investigation. Whether a model and a theory are equivalent, both can be used to understand phenomena and human activities. Both include concepts, constructs, and statements about their relationship (Cobley & Schulz, 2013). Craig (2013) defined a model as "a representation of a phenomenon" and a theory as "an explanation of a phenomenon" (pp. 46-47). It is worth mentioning here that Sriramesh (2000) used Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models to ethnographically investigate PR as a human activity in Indian contexts. These models are: (a) press agentry/publicity model, (b) public information model, (c) two-way asymmetrical model, and (d) two-way symmetrical model.

Sriramesh (2000) illustrated that these models are based on two standards: (a) the purpose of communication and (b) the nature of communication. The former refers to whether an organization uses persuasive communication to change its publics' behavior or its behavior based on the feedback it receives from the publics, while the latter refers to whether the communication between an organization and its publics is one-way or two-way. To elaborate, persuasive communication in the press agentry model is one-way. Its purpose is to change the publics' behavior by shedding light on the positive aspects of the organization and downplaying the negative ones. PR practitioners may "disseminate non-factual information" (Sriramesh, 2000, p. 288) in this model. In the public information model, the purpose of communication is to change the behavior of the public through one-way and factual (honest) communication. In the third and fourth models, the direction of communication is similar (communication is two-way in both), but the purposes differ. In the two-way asymmetrical model, organizations use the feedback they receive (through research) from their publics to repackage their messages in a way that suits the attitudes of the publics. In contrast, in the two-way symmetrical model, organizations use the feedback they receive from the publics to change their behavior in a way that suits the interests of the publics, and that's for the benefit of both sides.

5. Methodology

This study examines the culture within which PR is practiced, and discourse is produced at a university in Eastern Ontario. Public relations is practiced at the site under investigation in an office called the Public Affairs Office (PAO). A diversified group of five (three females and two males) works for the said office: the manager, the media relations supervisor, the social media supervisor, the internal communications supervisor, and a communications coordinator. The media relations supervisor is responsible for the university's media outreach; the social media supervisor is responsible for the social media posts; the internal communications supervisor is accountable for communicating the university's messages to its audiences through the Intranet, e-mail, and the LED signs throughout the campus; the communications coordinator helps in writing stories for the homepage and helps others achieve their assignments; and finally the manager of the Public Affairs Office who provided me with these brief job descriptions oversees these four employees and outside freelancers (when the PAO hires freelancers to do temporary jobs).

5.1 The Methodological Approach

This is an ethnographic study. According to Watson-Gegeo (1988), an ethnographic work investigates how people behave in their natural environments, emphasizing the cultural interpretations of their actions and is based on six fundamental factors: (a) it centers on the behaviors of the group(s) being examined; (b) it adopts a holistic perspective, aiming to describe all facets of a culture; (c) theoretical frameworks significantly inform it; (d) in addition to emic perspectives, ethnographic work incorporates etic viewpoints to facilitate cross-cultural comparisons; (e) it is inherently comparative, and (f) it posits that language is a conveyor of knowledge and acquired through social interactions.

Flewitt (2011) pointed out that early ethnographers spent years in their research communities. Green and Bloome (1997) suggested the following three ways for researchers doing ethnographies to immerse themselves in the field: (a) conducting ethnography, (b) embracing an ethnographic approach, and (c) employing ethnographic techniques and methods. Conducting ethnography involves a long-term, comprehensive, and in-depth examination of a cultural or social group of individuals within an anthropological framework, and embracing an ethnographic approach involves investigating some facets of the group's daily life and activities. This study embraces an ethnographic approach, which relies on theories from anthropology and sociology to guide research.

5.2 Data Collection and Ethnographic Account Production

Smart (1997) indicated that creating an ethnographic account involves two primary degrees of activity: (a) to collect specific types of data about the group or community under study and (b) to interpret the gathered data. According to the author, the data gathered consists of the observations of participants and descriptions of events taking place within the context under examination, which van Maanen (as cited in Smart, 1997) refers to as participants' "first-order constructs" (p. 69). Interpreting the gathered data, for Smart (1997), entails: (a) identifying the main themes (in the participants' first-order constructs), (b) coding the themes, and (c) using the themes to create a textual depiction of the participants' lives.

For this study, the data was collected via e-mail interviews. Because the five participants had busy schedules, they requested that the questions be emailed to them. Some of the genres and documents they produce were also collected for analysis. It is worth mentioning here that although some commentators highlighted the employment of multiple methods for collecting data as a characteristic of an ethnographic work (Hammersley, 2006), others claimed that, in some situations, interviews are culturally due and enough depending on the questions developed for the study (Hockey & Forsey, 2012). That's not to say that interviews are superior to observations but to validate ethnographies that rely on interviews.

Because this quasi-ethnographic study was conducted in a limited and tight timeframe, drawing large-scale conclusions on this important topic is challenging. Drawing more valid and large-scale conclusions requires observing and interviewing the subjects under investigation.

6. Findings

This part of the paper displays the results obtained from analyzing the collected data. The analyses will be displayed here in order based on the RQs.

6.1 The Culture of the Group

This study's first question (RQ 1) focuses on the characteristics of the culture in which public relations is practiced, and discourse is created at the site under examination. That is to say, understanding who is doing what, why, and how can be accomplished here with the help of activity theory, which offers investigators a lens to understand groups' activities, how they are performed, and their purpose (Hasan & Kazlauskas, 2014); and discovering the core aspects of the culture in which activities are performed can be accomplished with the help of social constructionism (Bruffee, 1986; Sullivan, 1995; Smart, 1997). This being the case, analyses regarding the group of public relations practitioners examined in this study will be presented as follows:

6.1.1 Activities and Duties

The media relations supervisor who is responsible for the university's media outreach performs a number of responsibilities and activities as follows: (a) identifying opportunities for media outreach including op-eds and speaking opportunities; (b) building relationships with key media covering the post-secondary sector, as well as media in specialty publications, and online media; (c) writing news releases, pitches, feature stories, advisories, official statements, bios, and backgrounders; (d) assisting in the development and execution of the PAO's and the university's communications strategies and outreach initiatives; (e) overseeing and coordinating the distribution of PAO's communications materials; (f) assisting in the production of the PAO's print and online publications in addition to producing audio and video scripts; (g) responding to media requests and referring those requests to the appropriate spokesperson or expert; (h) assisting in the daily monitoring of what is published about the university in the print and other media; (i) occasionally acting as spokesperson for the university; (j) identifying potential issues and playing a part in addressing them; (k) assisting in the provision of media training to the faculty and staff of the university; (l) shooting and editing video content to enhance news stories and feature stories on the university website; and finally (m) assisting in the organization of the university events where media might be in attendance.

As for the social media supervisor, his duties and activities can be summed up as follows: (a) monitoring Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn platforms and handling inquiries; (b) shooting and editing video content and uploading that content on YouTube and other platforms; (c) creating plans for the presidential accounts; (d) tracking the dates and products of all departments of the university using the Trello platform; (e) taking part in solving problems, handling issues, and managing crises as they relate to web communications and social media messaging; (f) assisting in writing news releases and backgrounders, pitches, advisories, and official statements; and finally (g) keeping the university's digital assets (photos, videos, etc.) organized in a Digital Asset Management (DAM) platform.

Regarding the internal communications supervisor, her duties and activities can be summarized in the following: (a) coordinating all the university's internal communications; (b) playing a part in the Intranet administration and content curation; (c) engaging in long-term planning to guarantee that the internal communications' services and products evolve continuously, and finally (d) assisting in writing different communications materials.

As for the communications coordinator who provides backup assistance to the media relations, social media, and internal communications supervisors, her duties and activities can be summed up as follows: (a) drafting press releases, composing stories, and writing media advisories for the university events, (b) fielding media requests, (c) coordinating lists of experts available to speak to media about the current affairs of the university, (d) supporting internal communications, and finally (e) coordinating campus bulletins boards.

About the manager of the PAO, her duties and activities can be summarized in the following: (a) overseeing the functions of the three supervisors and the coordinator who works for the office (mentioned above); (b) overseeing the university events and its website; (c) assigning the in-house writers, photographers, and outside freelancers (when necessary) to compile stories about the university; (d) dealing with the difficult issues and crises when they arise; (e) editing all the materials that come out of the PAO as a rule; (f) chairing weekly story meetings with the PAO employees; (g) acting as an emcee at press conferences and sometimes as a spokesperson for the university; and finally (h) conducting monthly media training sessions for faculty, staff, and senior graduate students.

6.1.2 Daily Routines

As shown above, the media relations supervisor performs many activities and duties, and his job is often very reactive, so, as he said, he does not have an established routine. Typically, he checks his messages when he first comes to the office and addresses inquiries. After that, he participates in a quick departmental stand-up meeting (often held daily), and based on that, he creates a goal list for the day and itemizes tasks that he is supposed to fulfill that day.

As for the social media supervisor, his daily routine is not predictable. He itemizes his tasks and activities for the day once he gets in the office and establishes priorities before doing those activities. Usually, he spends his day monitoring social media platforms, handling inquiries, and tracking the dates and products of all university departments using the Trello platform. Interestingly, the internal communications supervisor shares the same strategy of itemizing and prioritizing her activities with the social media supervisor. Typically, she divides her time between the Intranet's administration and its content's curation.

Regarding the communications coordinator, she usually starts her day by checking if any media advisory request forms have come in via e-mail. She then prioritizes them and starts drafting them for the manager to review before sending them to clients for approval. Then, she itemizes and prioritizes her daily assignments and starts doing them. Usually, the PAO assigns her to cover events, conduct interviews, and draft stories for the manager’s approval before she posts them on the webpage. She also coordinates between journalists and academic experts for journalistic interviews.

Concerning the manager of the PAO, she does not have an established routine as a manager. Every day is different, as she said. She usually spends part of her day meeting with people who want publicity for an upcoming event or their research. She also spends part of her time assigning stories and photography and editing all the materials her staff wrote, such as news releases, pitches, feature stories, advisories, official statements, bios, and backgrounders. She also holds one-to-one meetings with her staff to discuss their work. Depending on her schedule, she may attend events on campus and conduct media training for faculty, staff, and senior graduate students.

6.1.3 Collaboration

Remarkably, collaboration among the public relations practitioners under investigation characterized the culture within which they work and perform their duties and activities. For example, when the media relations supervisor (he is the one who usually writes press releases) was asked about the process through which press releases are produced, he said that much of the work comes in the initial drafting process and when he needs more details and quotes, he asks those concerned in the PAO to provide him with such content. Once the initial draft is done, he sends it to the PAO manager for review and feedback.

Interestingly, when the PAO manager was asked about this culture of collaboration, she said that her PR team is relatively small, and there is a fair amount of overlap in what they do. For instance, when putting a feature story on the home page, the group gets together to discuss ideas, and then she assigns a writer and a photographer to do the work. Once the job is ready, she edits it before sending it to the person concerned with “putting it together” in a format that suits Google Analytics. After that, the feature will be sent to someone else to do the “more technical job” of putting it online.

It's clear that the group fosters a culture of collaboration, which goes beyond the PAO in some situations. This enhances Journet’s argument (as cited in Smart, 1997) that the core of social constructionism is in the notion that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered, and groups of people, rather than individuals, construct it.

Moreover, the data collected shows that the group members often share common and overlapping expertise and back up each other during absences. This was highlighted by all of them: the manager, the media relations supervisor, the social media supervisor, the internal communications supervisor, and finally, the communications coordinator. They also use a project management system and frequent meetings to ensure they know where all projects stand and what steps are next.

Needless to mention here what the manager of the PAO said (describing her daily routine) that she holds one-to-one meetings with her staff to discuss their work, and what the media relations supervisor said that he daily takes part in a quick departmental stand-up meeting to discuss work issues. In addition to these daily meetings, the department holds long meetings to discuss work issues every Friday.

It is worth mentioning here that the group members under examination perform their duties and activities and produce their discourse following flexible routines within a collaborative culture to accomplish the university's mission, vision, and goals. The following extracts give evidence of this:

> 1. Public relations [at the site investigated] involves using communications tools and tactics to promote and enhance an organization's reputation [the university]. The PAO Manager
>
> 2. I am focused on enhancing the university's reputation and dealing with complex issues as they arise. The PAO Manager
>
> 3. [We] compile stories that shine a light on our students, faculty, staff, programs, and unique qualities. The PAO Manager
>
> 4. My responsibilities include identifying opportunities for media outreach to promote the university's programs, faculty, and research. The Media Relations Supervisor
>
> 5. [And include] reaching out to media to promote the university's researchers as experts. The Media Relations Supervisor
>
> 6. A pitch is a story idea sent to a journalist or editor in the hopes of getting positive media coverage [for the university]. The Media Relations Supervisor

Besides these extracts, carefully considering the press releases shows that 12 (92.3%) press releases out of 13 foregrounded the university's name. These press releases are available on the university's website. This clearly explains what Johnston and Everett (2012) claimed that organizations organize individuals and groups around prescriptive objectives and formalized rules meant to govern their relations and behaviors; and also explains what Smart (2003) claimed that workplace genres are viewed as a local (culturally and historically) situated sphere of collective effort where learning, knowing, and thinking are shared among numerous individuals to accomplish the workplace's intended objectives.

6.2 The Discourse Created by the Group

The second question (RQ 2) of this study pertains to the nature of discourse created by the public affairs office at the university under investigation. Based on the analyses of the data collected, the PAO produces news releases and backgrounders, feature stories, op-eds, pitches, advisories, statements, audio and video scripts, and bios. I asked those composing these genres to define how they perceive and use them. See below:

> 1. Press release: It is a written communication intended for members of the news media to announce something newsworthy…such as research, funding, launches of new programs or buildings, awards, honors, etc.
>
> 2. Pitch: A pitch is a story idea sent to a journalist or editor in the hopes of getting positive media coverage for a story related to the university.

It is essential to mention here that the media relations supervisor at the university clarified the difference between a press release and a pitch as follows: pitches, unlike press releases, are sent to specific people (not all mass media); they are less formal, and some press releases are attached with backgrounders. A backgrounder, as he explained, is historical background information about the event and the organization, and it is only sent to mass media along with press releases "when [the] context or [the] historical background is important, and more information is required beyond what is typically included in a press release."

> 3. Feature story: A feature story is a longer piece of writing…that investigates an issue, profiles a person, explains the research, etc., in depth. There are various people quoted and backgrounds [in feature stories].
>
> 4. Official statement: An official statement is usually issued in response to a media inquiry regarding a university issue. It sets out the university's position on the issue and may include future actions the university intends to take.
>
> 5. Op-ed: An op-ed is an opinion piece written for inclusion in a publication's editorial pages.
>
> 6. Media advisory: A media advisory is an invitation to the media to attend an event, such as a research announcement, conference, or groundbreaking event.

7. Bio: A bio is a short description of an individual's professional history and expertise.

Miller (2015) highlighted that a sound genre definition should emphasize the social act it aims to accomplish rather than its form and content. When the media relations supervisor at the university was asked about the purpose behind generating these genres, he said that these genres in general and pitches and press releases in particular aim to "increase the positive profile of the university and to reinforce its brand." Interestingly, Maat (2007) defined a press release as a genre that combines various kinds of communicative purposes, and these purposes may include dissemination of information, promotion, and persuasion. In addition to what the supervisor said, the following definition of public relations provided by the PR manager at the university reflects the purpose behind producing the genres mentioned above.

> Public relations involves using communications tools and tactics to promote and enhance the reputation of an organization [the university]/person/product etc. It involves identifying target audiences and supplying them with facts and compelling stories/information that will hopefully engage them.

As the definition suggests, public relations, as an activity, aims to engage the university's audiences through communication. The way PR is practiced here explains and enhances what Smart (1997) said that a genre is a thorough rhetorical strategy generated by groups to produce knowledge significant to their objectives, what Swales (1998) and Zhou (2012) said that a genre has identifiable communicative purposes that are linked to its rhetorical moves, and what Miller (2015) said that a genre mediates between the creator's purpose and the social need of the receiver.

6.3 The PR Model that Matches the Group's Practice

The third question (RQ 3) of this study was about the PR model that best represents the PR practice at the university under scrutiny. Extending a comprehensive answer to this question is challenging in a quasi-ethnographic study like the one at hand. Doing so requires long hours of observation and more profound interviews, which cannot be achieved in a short time.

This quasi-ethnography uses Grunig and Hunt's (1984) PR models to understand the reality of PR at the university being investigated. For Sriramesh (2000), these models are based on two standards: (a) communication nature (one- or two-way), and (b) its purpose—whether an organization uses communication to change its publics' behavior or its behavior based on the feedback it receives from publics.

Based on the data collected for analysis, the PR group examined here uses two-way communication. To explain, when a public relations group uses formal and informal research to develop a good reputation or explore the public's perception of the organization it represents, that's two-way communication. So, when a public relations group conducts surveys, that's formal research, and when it monitors what is published in the media about the organization, that's informal research. To elaborate, the activity mentioned by the media relations supervisor that the group daily monitors what is published about the university in the media to explore how the public perceives the university, the activity mentioned by the social media supervisor that he daily monitors the social media platforms for the same purpose, and the benchmarking that the PR group does on an irregular basis provide evidence of the PR group's involvement in informal research.

Regarding the purpose of the two-way communication used by the PR group, the data collected does not show that the PR team researches to develop mutual understanding between the university and its publics or to change the behavior and attitude of the university's management towards its publics. That is to say that the data collected shows (as mentioned in the previous section) that the PR group examined here does research to: (a) promote the university's programs, faculty, and scientific research; (b) to accomplish the university's mission, vision, and goals (this includes promoting and enhancing the reputation of the university); and (c) to change the public's attitude and behavior towards the university. All this was clear in the PR definition (the way the PAO practices it) provided above by the PAO manager, and, for Grunig and Hunt (1984), this is what PR does in the two-way asymmetrical model.

7. Conclusion

Three research questions were formulated for this study. The first question pertains to the characteristics of the culture within which public relations is practiced at a university in Eastern Ontario, the second pertains to the nature of the discourse created, and the third relates to the PR model that best represents the practice there.

The findings obtained from this study show that the group of public relations practitioners examined here fosters a culture of collaboration, and this culture of collaboration, which goes in some situations beyond the site for which they work, facilitates the fulfillment of their duties and activities and the production of their discourse and genres such as news releases, pitches, feature stories, advisories, official statements, bios, and backgrounders. Interestingly, this enhances Journet's assertion (as cited in Smart, 1997) that the core of social constructionism is in the notion that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered, and groups of people, rather than individuals, construct it. The findings also reveal that the two-way asymmetrical PR model matches the practice of the group examined.

Although providing thorough and comprehensive answers to the questions formulated for the study is not possible in a quasi-ethnography, I assume that the results gained here will enrich the public relations literature that has not broadly embraced ethnography (Everett & Johnston, 2012; L'Etang, 2012); and will contribute to PR theory and practice. That's to say that the study will be of use to PR writing instructors as it identifies the discourse generated in educational institutions and illustrates how the group of PR practitioners in the university examined collaborated about discourse production—the practice and discourse may differ from an organization to another depending on the area of practice and the needs of the organization. Moreover, the study will benefit the institution being studied as it evaluates how excellent its PR practice is. Given the limitations of this quasi-ethnographic study, it is challenging to draw large-scale conclusions; therefore, further research is both recommended and necessary.

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Authors contributions

This is a single-authored paper. Dr. Mohammed El-Astal collected the data, analyzed the data, and drafted and revised the manuscript.

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