The Strategic Role of Public Relations Is Strategic Reflection: A South African Research Stream

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The Strategic Role of Public Relations Is Strategic Reflection: A South African Research Stream

Benita Steyn

Abstract
This article introduces a South African (SA) research stream on the strategic role of public relations (PR). (a) The PR strategist role is conceptualized and verified in SA, together with the (redefined) PR manager and technician roles. (b) A comparative analysis of these roles and three of the four European Body of Knowledge (EBOK) roles (reflective, managerial, and operational) indicates conceptual similarity. (c) The PR strategist role index is broadened to incorporate the EBOK reflective role, and the new EBOK role (PR educationist) is conceptualized and operationalized as an educational and counseling role. All four EBOK roles are measured and verified in Company X in SA. (d) The refined instrument is used in another study to measure the roles of PR strategist, manager, and technician in South and East Africa. Two roles are verified, the PR strategist (including a reflective dimension) and a combined manager/technician role. Based on the findings of these studies, the PR strategist is relabeled reflective strategist, an important new role in South (and East) Africa that is centered on strategic reflection.

Keywords
strategic public relations, strategic communication management, PR strategist role, PR reflective role, PR roles research, public relations role indices, PR in South Africa

In the Bled Manifesto (a view on the purpose of public relations, PR, in Europe), Van Ruler and Verçiç (2002) suggested that the discussion on the fundamentals of PR be globalized and a dialogue between continents started in order to learn from one

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another. Terms used and theoretical approaches to these different terms should be discussed to develop a global language. This presents a challenge in view of the fact that relatively little international research has been published from a PR perspective. The field has been led by the United States, with U.S. textbooks being used all over the world and U.S. scholars/journals/conferences setting the direction for research.

This article introduces a stream of research on the strategic role of PR conducted in South Africa (SA) during the past 8 years. The PR strategist role, as first conceptualized by Steyn (2000c) and verified (Steyn, 2000a), rests on three pillars: **environmental scanning, organizational stakeholders** and **societal issues**. In the current business paradigm, the identification of and engagement with organizational stakeholders and interest/pressure groups developing around societal issues have risen to the top of the agenda of boards and top managements around the globe.

Contemporary concepts such as reputation, trust, legitimacy, transparency, governance, socially responsible behavior, and sustainable development are monopolizing strategic conversations in this century. These topics of societal discourse are increasingly becoming key strategic priorities for organizations, providing a window of opportunity for PR. In the framework of a strategic role for PR, these are important societal “issues” for organizations to consider, adapt to, and act upon. The PR strategist assists the organization to identify the stakeholders, values, norms, and expectations around these issues; pay attention to them; adjust organizational behavior to be socially acceptable; and thereby earn public trust.

As described in this article, the role of the PR strategist and its activities are as relevant today as it was when conceptualized and verified in 1999. If there are differences, they are pragmatic—methods of environmental scanning are more technology driven, the importance of some stakeholders groups (might) have shifted, new societal issues have come to the fore, and social media is rising in importance. The theoretical principles of strategic public relations/communication have however stood the test of time.

**New Business Paradigm Creates a Window of Opportunity for PR**

The substantiation of a strategic role for PR is to be found in the fundamental shift that has been taking place in the relationship of business to individuals and to society as a whole (Verwey, 1998). The Danish scholar Holmström (2000) opined that a new business paradigm is being institutionalized at present to ensure social order in an increasingly differentiated society, characterized by “corporate self-control and a more expansive corporate social responsibility” (p. 41). Government regulation and market forces are no longer sufficient to ensure social order. Organizational legitimacy and transparency are becoming important in an era where corporate and government mismanagement of issues is rife (Regester & Larkin, 2002). Corporate and institutional behavior are under greater scrutiny than ever before.

Business organizations have traditionally been focused on the achievement of financial goals. In an era characterized by a focus on the “triple bottom line,” where
social, political, environmental, and ethical issues have gained strategic importance, all strategic stakeholders as well as societal values and norms have to be considered when setting corporate direction. A good corporate reputation is now dependent on being regarded as trustworthy. Legitimacy is fast becoming a precondition for corporate social acceptance (Holmström, 2000). However, many business leaders still fail to understand that the “license to operate” is now obtained from society. Even if they do, many don’t have the knowledge to provide direction with regards to reputation risk, stakeholder and issue identification, or strategic communication management.

In the words of a chief executive (CEO) whom Steyn (2000b) interviewed on his role expectations for the most senior PR practitioner: “Top management does not know enough of communication to lead or expect” (p. 9).

The changing role of business in society thus has major implications for the role to be performed by the PR function, providing a window of opportunity for strategic role-playing. In the new interconnected world, the importance of stakeholder engagement is widely acknowledged. The CCI Corporate Communication Practices & Trends Study (Goodman, 2006) indicates that the biggest challenges facing PR today include building trust with all internal and external stakeholders, managing reputation, counseling top management on satisfying the societal demand for greater transparency and disclosure, fulfilling expectations for organizations to be good citizens, and understanding transparency as a best practice strategy for reputation management. In the wake of the collapse of Enron and Arthur Anderson, the “C-Suite needs an enhanced structure that promotes truth-telling—and it needs a newly empowered corporate voice of reason, at the topmost level” (“The Time Has Come for the Chief Communications Officer,” 2002, p. 1). It is proposed that a PR practitioner in the role of the strategist can lead the PR function in fulfilling this organizational need.

Lack of Strategic Role-Playing by PR Practitioners

Recent reports in the United States indicate that senior-level practitioners perceive PR’s role to be expanding (Goodman, 2006) and receiving more support from senior management (USC Annenberg, 2007). This is supported by research in Italy (Invernizzi, 2008) and by the European Communication Monitor 2008 study conducted by Zerfass (2008) in 37 European countries - both studies indicating the increasing institutionalization of the strategic role of PR. However, in the opinion of the author, many PR practitioners in SA (and arguably elsewhere) do not seem to be rising to the challenge spelled out by Regester and Larkin (2002) of giving strategic direction in managing reputation or communication relationships with strategic stakeholders/societal interest groups.

The contribution of PR to the achievement of corporate goals is still a mystery to many. Although practitioners provide counsel/advice to senior managers regarding communication-related problems, they often do not participate directly at the corporate and business levels (Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000). The PR function is often seen to be peripheral to policy formulation, not a legitimate part thereof. Budd’s (1991) description of PR as “a major industry, with corporate titles abounding, but no
closer to decision making than it was in the 1970s” (p. 9) still applies in many instances, today. This might be because the way PR is practiced reduces it to nothing more than communications—the exchange/transmission of information.

While much is written about the need to play a strategic role, few theoretical guidelines exist as to how PR should contribute to the organization’s strategy formulation process or what a strategic role for the PR practitioner actually constitutes (Steyn, 2000c, 2003a, 2003b). The findings of the studies reported in this article provide (some) guidelines in this regard.

**Historic PR Roles**

When considering the historical context, some light is shed on the problem of a lack of strategic role-playing. The concept of role was introduced to PR by Broom and Smith (1979) and became the most researched concept in the field (Pasadeos, Renfro, & Hanily, 1991). The definition of role has focused on “the position in a given social structure, on the actor in relation with others, or on the activities of organizational members” (Biddle, as cited in Toth & Trujillo, 1987, p. 46). Two empirical roles have dominated PR roles research: manager and technician. Practitioners in the PR manager role make communication policy decisions, are involved in all PR decision making, frequently use research to plan or evaluate their work, and counsel management. The PR technician provides the communication and journalistic skills needed to implement PR programs (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

While most roles research has taken place in the United States, studies undertaken elsewhere have also focused on the manager/technician dichotomy, indicating that practitioners are increasingly moving away from purely technical roles to managerial role-playing (Moss et al., 2000; Singh & Smyth, 2000; Watson & Sallot, 2001). In recent years, the PR role dichotomy has increasingly been criticized. There is a need to reexamine the adequacy of the role measures to make sure that they fully reflect practitioner activities in the 21st century (J. E. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Leichty & Springston, 1993; Moss & Green, 2001). According to Moss et al. (2000), insufficient attention has been paid to examining the nature of “managerial work” in PR context and how the PR “manager’s” role may vary at different levels—differentiating between practitioners who play a senior executive role and those who manage operational practices (Moss & Green, 2001).

**New Conceptual and Empirical Roles**

In the late 1990s, new conceptual/empirical roles started emerging in the PR literature, for example, the communication executive in the United States (Wright, 1995), the reflective and expressive role/dimension in Denmark (Holmström, 1996), and the sales manager and intermediary in the Netherlands (Van Ruler, as cited in Steyn & Green, 2006). A study conducted among PRSA members in the United States on role trends between 1990 and 1995 still found two roles in 1990, but in 1995 a third role emerged labeled the agency profile (Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998). In 2002, U.S. academics Petersen, Holtzhausen, and Tindall (2002) found four roles in SA, namely, liaison, media relations, cultural interpreter, and personal influencer.
Moss, Newman, and DeSanto (2005) found five dimensions of PR role-playing in the United Kingdom, the first four roles being managerial in nature (troubleshooter and problem solver, key policy and strategy advisor, issues management expert, monitor and evaluator) while the fifth was the communications technician. Everett (2005) replicated this U.K. study in SA and found two roles: strategic public relations manager and operational public relations manager.

In SA, Steyn (2000c) conceptualized the role of the PR strategist and redefined the manager and technician. This article will provide:

- first, an overview of Steyn’s conceptualization of these three roles;
- second, their subsequent verification in SA (2000a, 2000b, 2003a);
- third, a comparative analysis of Steyn’s empirical roles with emerging European role conceptualizations (Steyn & Bütschi, 2003);
- fourth, a reconceptualization of Steyn’s roles according to the European Body of Knowledge (EBOK) roles; and
- fifth, their verification in SA (Steyn & Green, 2006) and in South and East Africa (Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005).

**Conceptualizing the PR Strategist, Manager, and Technician Roles**

Based on the strategic management literature, Steyn (2000c, 2007) conceptualized the PR strategist as a strategic role at the top management or societal level, contributing toward the development of the organization’s enterprise strategy; redefined the historic PR manager as a middle management role at the functional level, developing PR strategy; and redefined the historic PR technician as an implementation role at the operational level, developing implementation strategy. The PR strategist is the information acquisition role of the boundary spanner, while the PR manager and technician roles form the information disposal role. The theoretical foundations of these roles in the PR literature (Steyn, 2003a, 2007) are the following:

- In order to contribute most to organizational effectiveness (J. E. Grunig, 1992), PR should be practiced on three levels: the macro level (role of the PR strategist), the meso level (role of the PR manager), and the micro level (role of the PR technician).
- Van Riel (1995) regarded PR’s role in the achievement of the organization’s mission as professionally carrying out the mirror and window functions. Steyn (2000c) broadened the mirror function (the foundation of the PR strategist role) to the “monitoring of relevant environmental developments and the anticipation of their consequences for the organization’s policies and strategies, especially with regard to relationships with stakeholders and other interest groups in society” (p. 3). She also broadened the window function (the foundation of the PR manager and technician roles) to “the preparation and
execution of a communication policy and strategy resulting in messages that portray all facets of the organization in a transparent way” (p. 3).

**Empirically Verifying the PR Strategist, Manager, and Technician Roles in SA**

The most obvious limitation of the vast majority of studies on PR roles is that they provide only a one-sided perspective of role enactment, namely, that of the PR practitioner. To overcome this, Steyn (2000a, 2000b, 2003a) measured the roles of PR strategist, manager, and technician among 400 SA CEOs, according to their expectations and perceptions of performance. A measurement index was developed to measure the role of the strategist, whereas the indices for the manager and technician roles consisted of both existing and new items. The self-administered questionnaire was distributed among CEOs by electronic mail—103 usable questionnaires resulted from the survey (26% response rate). Data analysis consisted of exploratory and common factor analysis. Confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the indices from the three-factor solution represented a (marginally) better fit than the two-factor solution (consisting of the strategist/manager and technician roles) that was extracted as a control measure. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients were 0.89 for Factor 1: PR Technician, 0.83 for Factor 2: PR Strategist, and 0.81 for Factor 3: PR Manager. Factor loadings and purified items for Factor 2: Role of the Strategist can be viewed in Table 1.

**Table 1. Measurement Indices for the Public Relations (PR) Strategist Role**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>Factor 1: The Role of PR Strategist (Cronbach alpha 0.83)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.829</td>
<td>Explain to top management the impact of their behavior (obtained through research) on key external stakeholders (media, investors, communities).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.776</td>
<td>Act as “early warning system” to top management before issues erupt into crises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.772</td>
<td>Act as advocate for key external stakeholders by explaining their views to top management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.748</td>
<td>Reduce uncertainty in strategic decision making by interpreting the external environment to top management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.684</td>
<td>Initiate dialogue with pressure groups limiting the organization’s autonomy, e.g. as environmentalists or consumer advocates or legislators.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most important findings of this study were first, the empirical support for the conceptualized role of the PR strategist; second, CEO expectations for senior PR practitioners to play such a role; third, CEO perceptions that the role is not performed; and fourth, an important new activity for the PR manager on the functional level was conceptualized and verified, namely, to develop PR strategy that supports the corporate strategy.

Conclusions are that in conceptualizing (and verifying) the role of the PR strategist, this study shifted the theoretical boundaries of the PR domain. The Excellence Study
pointed out that in order to be excellent, an organization must have a practitioner playing the role of the PR manager (J. E. Grunig, 1992). This study indicated that to be excellent, an organization should also have a practitioner playing the role of the PR strategist.

### Joining the Paradigm Debate Between the United States and Europe

At the 2002 BledCom Symposium in Slovenia, Van Ruler and Verçiç (2002) introduced the findings of the EBOK project: first, labeled, a societal view as the purpose of European PR and second, four PR roles/dimensions (Van Ruler, Verçiç, Flodin, & Bütschi, 2001; Verçiç, Van Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2001), labeled, reflective, managerial, operational, and educational (see middle column in Table 2). The EBOK researchers acknowledged that the roles lacked theoretical and methodological foundations. The managerial and operational roles had been discussed extensively in PR textbooks, and traces of the educational role could be found in organizational communication, management, and leadership textbooks. However, “the reflective dimension is yet to be developed and has only been discussed briefly in papers within communication and public relations science” (Van Ruler et al., 2001, p. 173). L. A. Grunig and Grunig (2002) commented that the primary question was how to understand “reflective” PR and whether the four EBOK roles could be empirically verified.

### Table 2. Comparative Analysis: South African Roles (Steyn, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c), European Body of Knowledge (EBOK) Roles (Van Ruler; Verçiç, Flodin, & Bütschi, 2001; Verçiç, Van Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2001), and Four Public Relations (PR) Characteristics (Van Ruler & Verçiç, 2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steyn’s three roles</th>
<th>EBOK’s four roles</th>
<th>Four public relations characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategist:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Reflective:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strategic role at macro/societal level</td>
<td>• Analyzing changing societal standards/values/viewpoints and discussing them with organizational members to adjust organizational values/norms regarding social responsibility and legitimacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conducting environmental scanning to gather information on stakeholders, publics, and issues</td>
<td>• Inward communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Information acquisition/processing role of boundary spanner</td>
<td>• Aimed at developing mission/organizational strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Outside-in approach to strategic management</td>
<td>• Directed at the dominant coalition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strategic contribution toward enterprise strategy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Performing the mirror function</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
A year later, at the 2003 BledCom Symposium, Steyn and Bütschi (2003) provided insight into reflective PR, based on the SA role of the PR strategist. They compared EBOK’s reflective, managerial, and operational roles (Van Ruler et al., 2001; Verçiç et al., 2001) to Steyn’s (2000a, 2000c) PR strategist, manager, and technician roles, finding them to be conceptually and pragmatically similar (see Table 2). They also compared Steyn’s (2000c) mirror and window function with the Danish academic Holmström’s (1996) reflective and expressive tasks of PR, finding them to be conceptually similar.

In conclusion, Steyn and Bütschi (2003) suggested that the conceptualization and verification of Steyn’s roles (a) could provide a basis for further theoretical and
methodological exploration of the “undefined” (European) concepts; (b) might be regarded as a verification of EBOK’s reflective, managerial, and operational roles; and (c) might even be regarded as an (indirect) measurement of Holmström’s (1996) European reflective paradigm and its central concept of mutual reflection, consisting of the reflective and expressive tasks (albeit unintended and theoretically imperfect).

The significance of such a claim would be that contrary to L. A. Grunig and Grunig’s (2002) expectations, it might indeed be possible to verify the European reflective role empirically. Should that be the case, the reflective role might be considered distinct from U.S. PR (but not Eurocentric, because similar roles have already been measured in SA). Conversely, the reflective role might not be distinct from U.S. PR and might be verified if it were measured there. Also, if the measurement of three roles in SA were to be considered a (indirect) measurement of the European reflective paradigm, then it might be that CEOs in SA expect the reflective/strategist role from senior PR practitioners (measured in the next study).

Empirically Verifying the Four EBOK Roles in Company X in South Africa

To continue the debate on reflective PR, the four EBOK roles were measured in a telecommunications service provider in SA, according to the expectations of the 140 most senior executives for the PR division (Steyn & Green, 2006). The primary research objective was the verification of the PR strategist/reflectionist, manager, technician, and educationist roles (see Table 2). Secondary objectives were:

1. to conceptualize and operationalize the PR educationist (newly identified by EBOK) as an educational role (Van Ruler et al., 2001; Verçiç et al., 2001) and a coaching role (Van Ruler & Verçiç, 2003) and to verify it;
2. based on Steyn and Bütschi’s (2003) comparative analysis, to operationalize and verify the PR strategist/reflectionist role by expanding Steyn’s (2000a) PR strategist role with a reflective (Holmström, 1996) and a counseling dimension (Van Ruler & Verçiç, 2003)—namely, to add measurement items reflecting a societal perspective for PR;
3. based on Steyn and Bütschi’s (2003) comparative analysis, to add new items to the existing indices of the (redefined) PR manager and PR technician roles (Steyn, 2000a) so as to include the expressive task (Holmström, 1996) and the conceptualizing/executing dimension of PR (Van Ruler & Verçiç, 2003) and to verify it.

The four EBOK roles were operationalized through 40 statements. Executives’ role expectations were measured by a self-administered electronic questionnaire, based on Steyn’s (2000a) questionnaire for measuring the roles of the PR strategist, manager, and technician. A new index was constructed to measure the PR
educationist, a role theoretically anchored in management communication (specifically leadership theory)—focusing on the communication involved in the relationship between manager/leader/supervisor and employees. A practitioner in the role of PR educationist facilitates, supports, assists with, encourages, or teaches managers their communication responsibility. (In this dimension, the role differed conceptually from the fourth EBOK role.) Furthermore, Steyn’s index for the PR strategist role was expanded with items measuring the reflective dimension of PR (Holmström, 1996; Van Ruler et al., 2001; Verçiç et al., 2001), based on the similarities between the roles pointed out by Steyn and Bütschi (2003), to be viewed in Table 2.

Initial data analysis consisted of exploratory and common factor analysis. The most important theoretical finding was the verification of four PR roles as conceptualized (based on the EBOK roles). Important are the two new roles: The PR Educationist emerged as Factor 1, summarized by 10 purified items with a Cronbach alpha of 0.96 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Purified Items for the Role of the Public Relations (PR) Educationist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>PR Educationist = Factor 1 (Cronbach alpha 0.96)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>Remind line management to give feedback on actions/decisions resulting from employee inputs/ideas/concerns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>Highlight to line management the importance of seeking subordinates’ feedback on their own (line managers’) performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>Call line management’s attention to the importance of motivating their teams to perform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>Encourage line management to listen to employees’ inputs/concerns/ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>Bring to line management’s attention the importance of supporting cross-functional teamwork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>Draw line management’s attention to the importance of providing their direct reports with information that enables them to do their work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>Encourage line management to give feedback to their direct reports on the company’s performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>Remind line management of the importance of giving performance feedback to their direct reports (subordinates).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>Underline to line management the importance of diagnosing/solving problems in their direct teams before such problems affect productivity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>Make line management aware of “walking the talk” (i.e., living the company values/vision.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factor 2 was labeled the PR Reflectionist/Strategist, summarized by all 10 items that operationalized this role, with Cronbach alpha 0.91 (see Table 4). Factor 3: PR Technician (Cronbach alpha 0.74) and Factor 4: PR Manager (Cronbach alpha 0.6) were the weaker roles. Because of their low alphas in the four-factor solution, a three-factor solution was extracted where the manager and technician roles combined into
one factor. When both solutions were subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis, the three-factor solution emerged as a marginally better fit on the data (Factor 1: PR Educationist, Factor 2: PR Strategist/Reflectionist, and Factor 3: PR Technician/Manager).

**Table 4. Purified Items for the Role of the Public Relations (PR) Strategist/Reflectionist**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor loadings</th>
<th>PR Strategist/Reflectionist = Factor 2 (Cronbach alpha 0.91)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>3 Advise top management of societal values/norms so that company strategies can be adjusted accordingly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>3 Enlighten top management on societal expectations for socially responsible behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>3 Make top management aware of the importance of accommodating perspectives (in society) different from their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>Act as an “early warning system” to top management before issues in the societal environment erupt into crises for our company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>3 Influence top management’s decisions to ensure that our company is regarded by society as being trustworthy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>3 Ensure a balance between organizational goals and the well-being of society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>Initiate dialogue with pressure groups in the societal environment that are limiting the company’s autonomy (e.g., environmentalists/consumer advocates/legislators.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>3 Ensure that top management balances the quest for the realization of organizational goals with respect for the natural environment (the planet).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>Explain to top management the impact of their behavior (obtained through research) on key stakeholders (e.g., the media/investors/customers).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>Act as an advocate for key stakeholders by explaining their views to top management.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Items that added a reflective dimension to the role of the PR strategist.*

The significance of these findings is that they provide the first empirical evidence that EBOK’s reflectionist and Van Ruler and Verčić’s (2003) counseling role are similar to Steyn’s PR strategist role, as suggested by Steyn and Bütschi (2003). They also provide the first empirical evidence that Holmström’s (1996) reflective task is similar to Steyn’s mirror function (Steyn & Bütschi, 2003) and that Holmström’s expressive task, as operationalized in this research, is somewhat similar to Steyn’s window function (Steyn & Bütschi, 2003).

**Two PR Roles Verified in South and East Africa**

Van Heerden and Rensburg (2005) measured the roles of PR strategist (including a reflective dimension), manager, and technician in a study among PR practitioners
from South Africa, Uganda, Nigeria, Kenya, Mauritius, Guinea, and Tanzania—using basically the same questionnaire as Steyn and Green (2006) and the same methods of data analysis. From a sample of 612, 151 usable questionnaires were received. Of the 21 items included in the measuring instrument, 18 were retained.

The final solution consisted of Factor 1: PR Strategist (including reflection), with the Cronbach alpha at 0.91. This role was summarized by all 10 of the original items, indicating a high concern for gathering information about societal issues among the respondents—adapting organizational strategies and policies to societal values/norms and deserving trust. Factor 2 consisted of the PR technician/manager role (Cronbach Alpha 0.78), summarized by 8 purified items—6 items defining the PR Technician and 2 items the PR Manager.

In conclusion, (a) because the role of the PR strategist (including reflection) was the strongest factor in this study, it can be said that a societal perspective characterizes the practice of PR among the South and East African respondents. (b) The 10 items that make up the role index of the PR strategist (including reflection) seem to be stable, and it is suggested that it be used in other studies/countries in an effort to standardize the PR strategist/reflectiveist index. (c) The PR manager role is weak, consisting of only 2 items. This finding points to mainly a technician and strategist/reflectionist role played by the respondents. Pointing out differences between previous studies and this one, the latter employed snowball sampling (due to problems with data collection in Africa), consisted of self-reports by PR practitioners, and described current practice (not CEO expectations).

**Discussion**

Important findings and conclusions have already been pointed out at the end of each study. Therefore, background and considerations with regards to the findings, overall trends deduced, and considerations for the future will be discussed here.

The role of the PR strategist was originally conceptualized based on the strategic management and PR literature, and empirically verified according to the expectations of 103 CEOs. (It was the perception of CEOs that this role was not performed.) Using CEOs as respondents overcame the limitation of “self-reporting,” where PR practitioners report “what they would like to see or do” rather than what they are “actually doing.” It however invites the question of whether the PR strategist role would have emerged if the respondents had been PR practitioners. It was probably easier for CEOs to recognize the strategist role because the study was conceptualized from a strategic perspective and they were already facing the consequences of a changing business paradigm. On the other hand, Van Heerden and Rensburg (2005) verified the PR strategist role (including a reflective dimension) 5 years later among practitioners in South and East Africa. Further investigation on whether the PR strategist/reflectiveist role is only expected by top management or whether it is increasingly being performed by senior PR practitioners is thus needed.

The verification of the four EBOK roles in Company X answers the Grunigs’ question (posed at BledCom 2002) of whether the European roles could indeed be
measured. Most important theoretically in this study was the verification of the two “new” roles, namely, the PR strategist/reflectionist and PR educationist, their purified role indices providing a basis for further research. The verified PR educationist role is an important step toward concretizing the contribution of PR toward management/leadership communication. The roles having been verified according to the expectations of 120 top executives (including the Board) is significant, confirming the window of opportunity for strategic role-playing by PR and senior managers’ need for assistance to cope with stakeholders and issues.

The PR strategist/reflectionist, a consistently strong role in all the studies, points to the emergence of a new PR role in South (and East) Africa and provides indications of strategic role-playing expected of and performed by (some) practitioners in South and East Africa. It also reflects the African collective culture with its strong sense of community. The PR manager consistently being the weakest role (combining with the technician role) necessitates further research to clarify whether the role needs further conceptualization and/or new measurement indices, and also to further investigate the combined role as a manifestation of the expressive task of PR (Steyn’s window function).

Based on the verification of the PR strategist/reflectionist (Holmström’s reflective PR task and Steyn’s mirror function) and the combined PR manager/technician role (a manifestation of Steyn’s window function and Holmström’s expressive PR task), we might be witnessing the first faint stirrings of reciprocal strategic reflection as a purpose of PR (in Africa). It is suggested that these findings be further explored in Africa and on other continents.

Strategic Reflection as the Strategic Role of PR

If the purpose of PR is reciprocal strategic reflection, consisting of both a reflective and expressive task (Holmström, 1996), then the strategic role of PR (as the reflective task/mirror function) is strategic reflection. The author thus relabels her original PR strategist role (which now includes a reflective dimension, previously referred to in this article as the PR strategist/reflectionist) to the reflective strategist.

Focused on strategic reflection, the reflective strategist acts as a coordinating mechanism between organization (business, government, or nonprofit) and environment, providing management with an outside (societal) perspective, assisting them to reflect on the organization’s position in the bigger context with the aim of balancing organizational goals with the well-being of society (the collective interest/common good). By spanning the organizational boundary, gathering information by means of environmental scanning, transmitting this information to management, and providing it as input to the strategy formulation process, the reflective strategist enlightens management on societal/stakeholder values, norms, and expectations for socially and environmentally responsible behavior. Management is also influenced to state the organization’s position, practice two-way communication, and build trusting relationships with stakeholders about issues of strategic importance.
The reflective strategist acts as an advocate for key stakeholders by explaining their views to management, making the latter aware of the impact of their behavior/organizational policies and strategies on key stakeholders and societal interest groups. The reflective strategist approaches any problem with a concern for the implications or consequences of organizational behavior toward and in the public sphere/external environment, constantly on the lookout for new stakeholders or interest groups significant to the organization’s well-being, solving or avoiding conflict between organizational behavior and the public perception of how socially responsible organizations should operate. The reflective strategist acts as an early warning system to management before issues in the environment erupt into crises, initiating dialogue with pressure groups limiting the organization’s autonomy, drawing management’s attention to the importance of accommodating perspectives different from their own.

The reflective strategist influences management to adapt their strategies to societal/stakeholder values, norms, and expectations, balancing the quest for the realization of organizational goals with respect for the natural environment (the planet) and its inhabitants (the people). Management is made to understand that public trust is not earned by simply changing outward communication to signify responsibility—an organization has to behave accordingly, show concern for broader societal issues and values considered publicly relevant, and practice self-restriction to obtain legitimacy and a good reputation and garner trust. Social and environmental responsibility is thus at the core of strategic public relations practice, the lens through which to determine the boundaries of acceptable behavior and the collective interest.

Closing Remarks

This article presents an overview of research in SA on the strategic role of PR and the process leading to its repositioning within a societal/reflective approach. It refers only to certain highlights and is not intended as a comprehensive summary of the research program. Rather, the aim is to present to an international audience some research findings locked away in national publications and conference papers. As such, the author entered the “trading zone,” described by Taylor-Huber and Morreale (as cited in L. A. Grunig & Grunig, 2002) as a place where “scholars translate, tell, and persuade ‘foreigners’ to hear their stories and try their wares . . . seek advice from and collaboration with those ‘others’ especially when their own references, methods, and colleagues are unable or unwilling to fill in the gaps” (p. 32).

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Note

1. Readers interested in detailed findings and conclusions of any of the studies can contact Benita Steyn at b.steyn@lantic.net.

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