

**RECURRING CRISIS OF CREDIBILITY?
THE STATE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on the notion that Prisa's approaching 55th anniversary presents an opportunity to reflect on the current state of public relations in South Africa – a state of affairs brought into sharper focus by the substantive change in the country subsequent to 1994's new political dispensation. This qualitative field survey asked the following research question: How do the presidents of Prisa who have served terms of office since 1994 view the current state of public relations in this country? The purposive sample resulted in ten respondents and an interview strategy was utilised to elicit responses in terms of an interview schedule. The thematic analysis brought about a two-fold picture: there appears to be increasing pressure on the public relations industry from the outside, with a commensurate collapse from within the industry itself. The article concludes that in many respects this study underscores the fact that not much has changed in the public relations industry; therefore, one could argue that the findings point to a recurring crisis of credibility in the South African public relations industry.

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INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

South Africa has one of the world's "more mature" public relations industries (Sudhaman 2010). Here, the industry is approaching its 55th anniversary, given the founding year of the Institute for Public Relations & Communication Management (Southern Africa). Prisa, the acronym by which the Institute has been known for years, was established in 1957 and still serves as a mainstay for the public relations profession in this country¹.

Since its earliest days, public relations in this country and on a wider front has been beset with a number of concomitant issues, including: confusion with regard to its nomenclature and what the practice entails, misunderstanding as to its intrinsic value and contribution to management, and disagreement regarding its positioning in the corporate hierarchy (cf. Roodt 1988: 4, 5; White & Verčič 2001). No surprise, then, that as early as the mid-70s, in South Africa and abroad, mention was made of a lack of credibility regarding public relations practice (Roodt 1988: 5).

In South Africa these and other issues, such as the professionalisation of public relations (Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes 2008), have been brought into even sharper focus by the substantive change and upheaval in the country subsequent to the establishment of the new political dispensation in 1994. Research has confirmed the impact of the environment on public relations practice, particularly during times of political change (Holtzhausen 2005). Thus, the process of comprehensive democratisation in South Africa has had a significant effect on public relations and it is therefore logical to restrict the time-frame for a discussion of the *status quo* of public relations in this country to the period following this momentous date.

So, the eve of Prisa's 55th anniversary presents an opportunity to reflect on the current state of public relations in this country². Given this meaningful vantage point it stands to reason that presidents of Prisa may be regarded as a rich source of information concerning the industry's *status quo*: not only have they been nominated and elected by their peers after serving in the ranks of the Institute, but they have also brought their particular background in public relations and their specific perspectives of public relations (corporate, consultancy, and academe) to bear on the Institute, its management and its affairs for a cumulative period of 17 years (post 1994). Another rationale for focusing this survey on Prisa's presidents can be found in the study by the Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes (2008) in which the authors suggest that Prisa's views could be included in any future research regarding public relations and its professionalisation. It is this author's contention that Prisa's views should indeed be included and in this brief survey this will be done by way of the Institute's mouthpiece, i.e. its president.

The aim of this study, therefore, was to garner the views of a specific group of people – the former presidents of the industry's professional institute – regarding the state of public relations in this country. To this end, interviews were used to collect information while thematic analysis (Wilson & MacLean 2011: 551, 557) was applied in order to analyse and interpret the data. The rationale for adopting this qualitative approach is

highlighted by the research question, namely that of how the presidents of Prisa who have served terms of office since 1994 view the current state of public relations in South Africa. Given that the researcher's emphasis was on understanding (*verstehen*) (Mouton 2001: 141), a qualitative approach was deemed to be the most appropriate one to meet the researcher's aim of understanding how the former presidents of Prisa view the *status quo* of public relations.

DEFINITION AND ORIENTATION

As indicated above, the definition and description of public relations has been a contentious matter since the discipline's inception. Thus, there is no point in entering into a debate as to the best possible definition of the practice. For the purposes of this article, the author proposes the use of the definition which has held fast in South Africa for almost 15 years. The definition was ratified by Prisa and announced to its membership in February 1998 (*Communica* 1998: 1): "Public relations is the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders."

For the purposes of further discussion, it is deemed necessary to position public relations practice in terms of the disciplines with which it is most commonly associated/confused, namely marketing and advertising.

Marketing is primarily concerned with an organisation's products and services: it identifies the needs of consumers for these products and services, and fills the gap between the need on the one hand, and actual acquisition on the other, by communicating product- and service-related information. Marketing makes use of various tools for this purpose, traditionally referred to as the marketing mix. Advertising is equally concerned with products and services, on the one hand, and with ideas, on the other. Its emphasis is on persuasion, with a view to driving consumer behaviour. Its purpose is to establish the image of brands. Advertising is a form of controlled communication in that the content of the advertising message, as conveyed through different media, is determined, and paid for, by the advertiser – either directly or through an agency.

Products and services are clearly not the domain of public relations. Rather, the discipline is concerned with the organisation's image, and with the management of every aspect which might influence that image. Therefore, in brief, the focus of communication in the public relations sphere is on creating and managing relationships with key stakeholders.

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

This small-scale study may be defined as field research (cf. Chesebro & Borisoff 2007: 8) and a qualitative approach was followed for reasons explained above. The researcher made use of an interview strategy.

The study was undertaken in two stages. During the first stage the author conducted archival research (Wilson & MacLean 2011: 240), analysing various communiqués published in *Communika*, Prisa’s in-house publication – the original documents, in bound form, were obtained from the Prisa office in Randburg. Typically, these communiqués took the form of an induction speech, various progress reports issued during the presidential term of office, and a farewell speech. The researcher used the information gleaned in this way as a basis for drafting the interview schedule. Stage two comprised the interview process. The study was initiated in March this year (2011), and the interviews were conducted during April and May. Analysis of the data commenced in June.

Sampling

The selection of participants for the study was relatively uncomplicated as the population consisted of all former presidents of Prisa since the Institute’s inception in 1957³. For reasons explained earlier, the timeframe was demarcated as 1994 to the current year, 2011. This resulted in a small, purposive sample numbering 11. The names of the concerned persons are listed in table 1.

TABLE 1: PRESIDENTS OF PRISA FROM 1994 ONWARDS

1994 – 1995	Zarine Roodt APR, FPRISA ⁴
1996 – 1997	Vicky Baker APR
1998 – 1999	Anthea Johnston APR, FPRISA
2000 – 2001	Sej Motau CPRP, FPRISA
2002	Margaret Rowe APR
2003 – 2004	Kate Bapela APR, FPRISA
2005 – 2006	Merle O’Brien APR, FPRISA
2006 – 2008	Mixael de Kock ⁵ APR, FPRISA
2008 – 2010	Victor Sibeko CPRP, FPRISA
2010 – 2011	Samantha Louis APR
2011 – current	Ronél Rensburg CPRP

The Prisa president at the time of the 1994 elections was the author. Reflective of the winds of change sweeping the country at the time, she was the first female president of the Institute, while Sej Motau was the first black president to be inaugurated, later followed by Kate Bapela as the first black female president. Subsequent to the author’s term of office, nine presidents have served, with the tenth having been inaugurated in June this year.

The author was excluded from the sample for obvious reasons. It may be mentioned that she had retired from the public relations profession in September 1999, but a background of some 20 years in the industry prior to that placed her in an ideal position to manage the research process and to keep its findings in perspective, while having the benefit of distance and retaining a measure of objectivity.

Interviews were conducted with nine of the ten presidents who had succeeded the researcher (Vicky Baker declined as she had moved out of the public relations sphere). Although Kelly (1999: 381) regards six to eight sampling units as sufficient for a homogeneous sample, the author is mindful of the fact that a sample as small as this one raises obvious questions regarding the generalisability of the findings and conclusions.

The nine participants in the survey include persons of both genders, with the female participants (6) outnumbering the males (3) – a reflection of the gender profile of public relations in South Africa. Four of the participants are black and the rest white. All of them live in South Africa, with the exception of one respondent who now resides in France and another who divides her time between South Africa and India. No other demographic markers are relevant to this study other than the fact that one of the participants has retired from public relations. The participants are evenly spread across the different spheres of public relations, and offer solid representation from the consultancy and corporate sectors, and, in one instance, from academia – and it is thus clear what manner of expertise has led Prisa over the years. The participants fall within the two higher levels of Prisa registration, while most of them have been acknowledged as Fellows of Prisa (see endnote 4 for further explication).

Access was gained in the following manner: the author approached Prisa's president at the time, Samantha Louis, and the Institute's Executive Director, Adele Paulsen, to obtain their permission and support for the proposed survey. The names and chronological order of succession of the presidents were obtained from the Prisa Office Manager, together with contact details for most of them. A letter of intent was sent to the former and current presidents via e-mail in March this year, requesting their participation. Additional steps had to be taken in order to trace Anthea Johnston in France and Merle O'Brien in India and Facebook was used for this purpose. Participation did not present a problem as the participants knew the author; therefore, an interviewer-interviewee "relationship" already existed.

Data collection

Having decided on an interview strategy the author made use of the following procedure to gather information: semi-structured interviews (cf. Wilson & MacLean 2011: 201) were deemed to offer the best format and an interview schedule (cf. Wilson & MacLean 2011: 202) was regarded as a suitably flexible research tool – hence the questions were open-ended in nature (Wilson & MacLean 2011: 203). The scope of the interviews was aimed at arriving at an understanding of a group perspective (Fontana & Frey 2005: 698) and nine basic questions were formulated⁶.

The information-collection process comprised a combination of individual, face-to-face verbal interchange (Fontana & Frey 2005: 698) and electronic interviewing, while in certain instances, distance interviews were conducted (i.e., via e-mail). The interviews were restricted to a once-off brief exchange (Fontana & Frey *ibid.*) and were conducted in English, the professional language of choice in this country.

Where their programmes allowed this, face-to-face interviews were scheduled with participants in Pretoria (Kate Bapela), Johannesburg (Mixel de Kock) and Cape Town (Sej Motau). Telephone interviews were conducted with two participants (Samantha Louis and Ronél Rensburg). The questions on the interview schedule were sent to the remaining participants and they responded via e-mail: Anthea Johnston, Margaret Rowe, Merle O'Brien and Victor Sibeko.

The author recorded the face-to-face interviews on a digital recorder and had these transcribed, while the telephonic interviews were taken down in typed format by the author. The responses arising from the distance interviews were forwarded in MSWord files via electronic mail by the respondents. The transcriptions and e-mail responses were saved in one specific file on the author's notebook computer, and a back-up containing all the data was securely stored in a personal safe.

Data analysis

The author followed an informal approach as the nature of this field survey did not require sophisticated analytical methods. Two points are worth mentioning: as suggested by Seidman (2006: 112-118), the author avoided an in-depth analysis of the interview data until all the interviews were completed. The transcripts were then studied for the first time in order to avoid projecting anything learnt from the earlier participants onto the later data. Secondly, the interview transcripts were analysed in the order in which the participants had served their term of office (rather than in the order in which the interviews were conducted) so as to facilitate a chronological unfolding of themes.

Ethical considerations

Of the conventional ethical criteria of informed consent, the right to privacy and protection from harm (Fontana & Frey 2005: 715) only the first applied to this particular survey, and it was mediated by the pre-existing collegial and professional relationship between the author and the participants. The author explained the purpose of the survey and of the proposed interviews in a letter which was mailed to the intended participants and consent was obtained in this manner. Further to the issue of consent: permission to make audio recordings was obtained prior to the interviews.

It should be pointed out here that the participants' right to privacy was never at stake as each participant understood from the outset that the interview was to be conducted with him or her in a specific capacity, namely his or her position as president of Prisa at some prior point. Therefore, anonymity did not comprise a criterion in the context of the survey.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The author made use of thematic analysis for the following reasons: First, because thematic analysis “looks for patterns, or themes, across whole sets of data” ; secondly, it is flexible and versatile (Wilson & MacLean 2011: 551). The author took note of some points of criticism levelled at thematic analysis, namely an apparent lack of theory, the absence of a single agreed-on method of thematic analysis and the limited interpretative power of such analysis (Wilson & MacLean 2011: 553). However, the decision was made to persist with this technique, mainly because of its flexibility and versatility which suited the uncharted course in this study.

The emerging themes point to a two-fold picture: there appears to be increasing pressure on the public relations industry from the outside, with a commensurate collapse from within the industry itself.

Pressure from the outside

- “Public relations has been suffocated by a crowding in of disciplines into the communication space”;
- “Our other peers take away the credibility of what we do”;
- “Public relations has been stripped of its value”;
- Owing to the global credibility crisis in communication, public relations in South Africa has suffered: “People are very wary of public relations”; “Public relations is no longer trusted at all”;
- The political landscape in the country impacts on public relations: “A key factor that continues to hamper public relations in South Africa is the growing mistrust between government and business, media, labour and civil society due to corruption, lack of accountability, etc.”; “Public relations has now become a tool in the ‘business of politics’. Political appointments, for example, are being made in prominent communication positions, without these incumbents having any business acumen or qualifications or ‘diplomatic’ skills to handle high-voltage public relations problems in a changing society”; “The point is that there is massive government wastage and massive fraud in the name of public relations which is not public relations – and this contributes to the credibility crisis in this country”;
- “The environment has become too complex to navigate using public relations’ existing basket of tools – they are too lightweight to deal with the task at hand”; “Public relations is powerless to play in the new media environment.”

The flip-side of the coin points to a collapse from within the public relations industry:

Collapse from within

- There is a “void of experience” in the industry, as seasoned public relations practitioners have emigrated and/or retired. “Many of yesteryear’s best

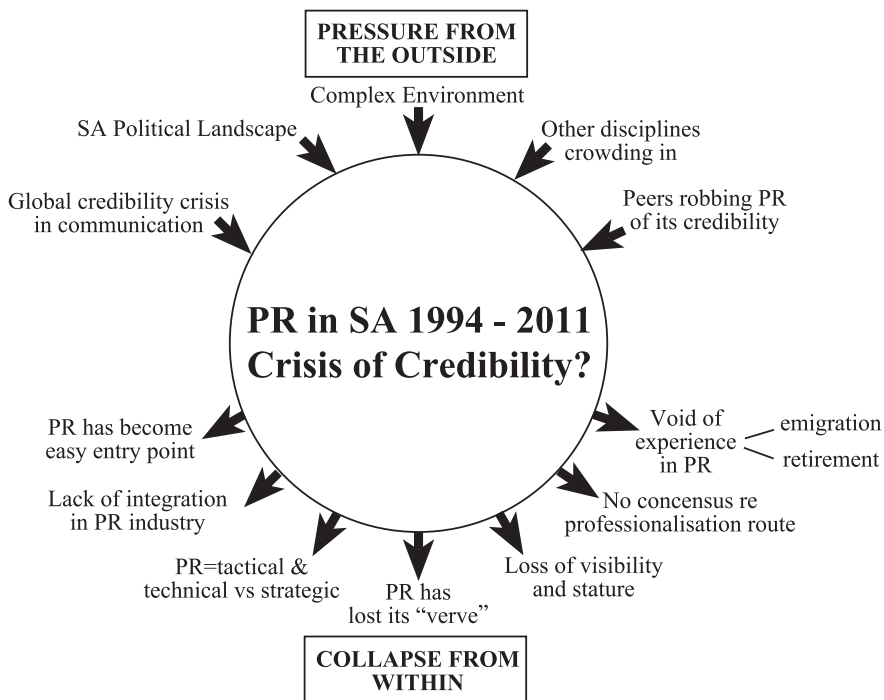
professionals left the profession as they found themselves competing with fly-by-nights, journo's, secretaries, etc. and Prisa ignored this"; "The loss of membership, especially senior members, coupled to the fact that the APR figures have not grown, means that Prisa does not have 'critical mass'; "Prisa is flying blind without a wisdom base of knowledgeable leaders: it cannot show practitioners which mountains to climb or lead the way up because it lacks a dominant coalition of people with the influence to turn the tide";

- Public relations has become an "easy entry point" for practitioners who do not embark on full public relations practice. Also, as one participant succinctly pointed out: the non-regulated aspect of Prisa has led to "a vast increase in kitchen-table consultants who really don't know what they are doing. Regrettably, these people all qualify in terms of BEE and tend to get a lot of jobs which they screw up – which feeds into the downward spiral of credibility loss";
- There is a lack of integration regarding the different areas of speciality in public relations: "clusters of practitioners are encountered across the country", but the "glue" to link them is lacking;
- Perceptions of public relations are affected by the fact that "we tend to talk tactical language instead of strategic business language", and that "the practice in general is still very 'technically' as opposed to 'strategically' oriented, as well as the fact that "PR has never really been a high intellectual content activity";
- There appears to be general consensus that the public relations industry has "lost its lustre", as evidenced by comments such as "There is a lot of work that needs to be done in terms of revitalising public relations"; "Public relations needs to redefine and re-position itself" in order to reclaim its position in the communication sphere; and "The public relations sector needs to sophisticate itself";
- The public relations industry has suffered from a loss of visibility and stature: "We had some significant public relations personalities ... these days I don't even know who speaks for public relations"; "The stature of public relations has been diminished over the years";
- Public relations practitioners in South Africa can be divided into two groups: professional, ethical practitioners, versus unprofessional, opportunistic ones. One respondent believes that ethics are "largely ignored as superfluous";
- There is no agreement amongst Prisa's base of experience as to the form that professionalisation should take: "It goes against the grain ... I don't believe people should be forced" and "Public relations should never be legislated", as against "The industry should lobby for strict barriers to entry and Prisa must enforce regulation"; "I think the public relations profession needs a statute; it needs to be regulated, and I think that regulation has to happen soon". This points to the old divide in public relations: "People can practise without restriction",

and practitioners “get away with practicing without accreditation; they don’t need a professional body to vouch for them” in view of the fact that “Prisa is not representative of all who practise”, “PRISA has no teeth”, and there is “no perceived value in belonging” (to Prisa). The upshot of all this is that there are “no requirements for practitioners to join Prisa in order to practise. Until this happens, public relations will lack credibility as a profession.”

These findings are illustrated in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: TWO-FOLD PICTURE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA



Furthermore, it is clear from the findings that the public relations industry, at least in South Africa, still bears the proverbial albatross around its neck – there is confusion regarding its name and practice, and misunderstanding as to its value and contribution. Predictably, the professionalisation of the practice remains a real concern with no consensus as to how it should actually be accomplished. As a result of the current political climate, even more emphasis is being placed on professionalisation, with a strong focus on ethics.

Other than those already emphasised, the following findings should be highlighted:

1) The King III Report⁷, commissioned by the Institute of Directors (IoD), strikes a real note of optimism: “There could be no better time than now for public relations professionals to make their voices heard and earn the respect they deserve – especially with the overwhelming recognition of the importance of our role in good corporate governance.”

2) Prisa’s initiative in terms of the Global Alliance is a source of pride⁸. “Internationally, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management recognises Prisa as one of the most important role-players of its kind on the national and global stage.”

3) An Afrocentric orientation in the South African public relations industry is borne out by statements such as “We do not expose ourselves as role models to our young up-and-coming professionals”, and “Young people have to have somebody to look up to”, as well as by the use of terms such as “network” and “Ubuntu”. In addition, “One of the things we want to do in South Africa is to take our experience and share it with the rest of the continent. There are at least 40 states that need development and then we will take our credibility to a whole different level.” Finally, “Prisa has the (education) blueprint for the African situation – therefore it will be a sad day if a Eurocentric model is applied to Africa.”

4) The chronological change in perceptions of transformation within the public relations industry is apparent:

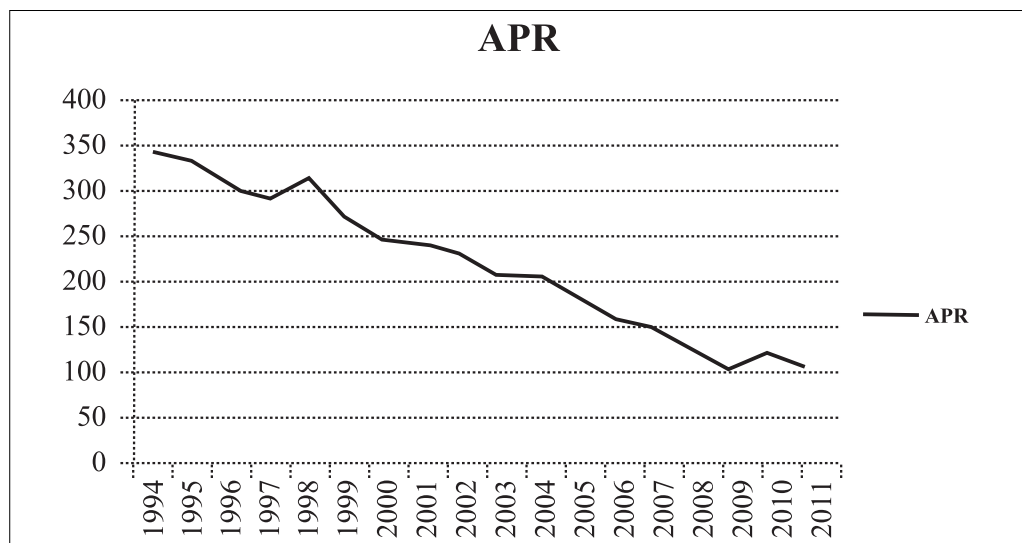
- Sej Motau (2000-2001): “The face of Prisa has changed from previously all white and middle-class, (it) is now more integrated than previously”;
- Kate Bapela (2003-2004): “Prisa has really tried to bridge the transformation issues”;
- Mixael de Kock (2006-2008): “For many years the black component of Prisa has been very militant about transformation, yet they were almost totally absent in the processes instituted to effect transformation”;
- Victor Sibeko (2008-2010): “Prisa had its share in addressing transformation, but its efforts were short-lived. The real transformation we would like to see is in the corporate world with more young professionals taking on much more responsible positions.”

Two matters that were raised repeatedly during the interviews require explication, the first being the question of ethics, while the second pertains to Prisa membership figures, particularly in the senior echelons. Considering the contrasting perceptions of ethics in public relations as being “largely ignored as superfluous” and “almost non-existent” as opposed to the observation that there have been only a “few incidences of unethical behaviour”, the author attempted to clarify this issue, at least partly. As there is no longer a standing Prisa committee, formerly known as the Ethics and Disciplinary

Committee, the former Chief Executive Officer of Prisa, Margaret Moscardi (who retired in mid-2009, after joining Prisa in 1980) was asked about the number of cases reported to Prisa. The current procedure entails the convening of an *ad hoc* committee by the Prisa Board, as and when such cases arise. According to Moscardi (2011) there has been one instance of an ethical issue which was followed up and conducted to a final conclusion (in June 1999). It related to charges of drunkenness and disorderliness during the Prisa AGM and national conference. The APR status of the practitioner in question was removed by the full Board which was convened immediately for this purpose and his employer was advised accordingly. Subsequent to this Moscardi also recalls two complaints which were not subjected to the disciplinary process, as they revolved around the legal issues in respect of money owed to consultants which clearly did not fall within Prisa's ambit. Lastly, a more recent complaint involved a consultant employer and a staff member. However, Prisa could not take action as the staff member in question did not renew his membership. Thus, the fact of the matter is that the former CEO of Prisa recalls only four cases of ethical concerns being brought to the attention of the Institute. Given the unregulated nature of the public relations industry, this is probably not an accurate reflection of the true state of affairs.

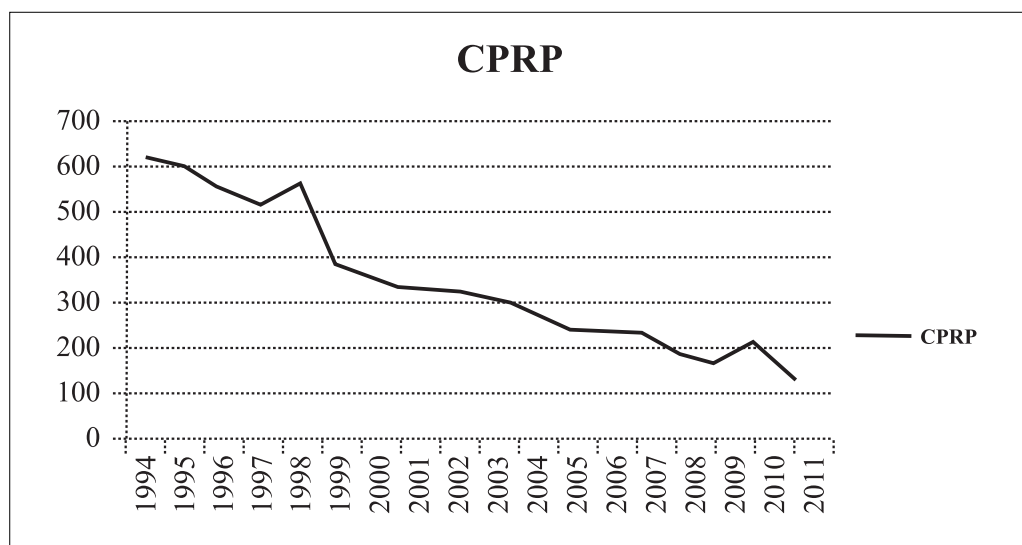
Secondly, the matter of membership, which has been a contentious issue for a large part of Prisa's history, should be placed in perspective since more than one president made mention of the drop in membership figures. By way of background: there are four different categories of professional registration within Prisa, of which individual registration is one. This category comprises different levels, i.e. Affiliate, Associate, Public Relations Practitioner (PRP), Chartered Public Relations Practitioner (CPRP) as well as Accreditation in Public Relations and Communication Management (APR) – the highest level of the Prisa Registration System. FPRISA denotes fellowship of the Institute. (There are currently 19 fellowships.)

In March 1999, in *Communica*, Prisa claimed a membership of 6 000. However, a bone of contention that arose prior to this point was the fact that only 2 000 of these were registered public relations practitioners – the rest were student members. This phenomenon relates to the fact that membership of Prisa was compulsory for students who applied for the Basic and Advanced Certificates in Public Relations Practice and this artificially inflated the membership figures – a problem that was discussed extensively at Prisa Executive meetings in the early nineties. By omitting the student figures, it is possible to gain an accurate picture of the number of so-called “senior” members of Prisa; and these figures have declined from 1 906 in 1994, to 913 at present. A number of presidents were particularly concerned about the declining APR figures and the effect of this tendency on the industry. The figures prove that this is indeed a matter for concern – see figure 2 below, which illustrates a decline from 341 to 100.

FIGURE 2: THE NUMBER OF APRs WITHIN PRISA

(Source: PRISA)

If this trend is read in conjunction with the CPRP figures, pertaining to the second most senior level of registration in PRISA, in figure 3 below, it is obvious that this is a serious matter as the numbers have dropped from 624 to 198.

FIGURE 3: THE NUMBER OF CPRPs REGISTERED WITH PRISA

(Source: PRISA)

It should immediately be pointed out that the declining figures highlighted above are not unique to Prisa. In fact, professional bodies in South Africa and internationally have been similarly affected in recent years. Furthermore, this decline should be viewed against the background of the fact that membership of public relations' professional body in this country is not compulsory. What is of concern is that, as far as can be ascertained, Prisa has not attempted to determine the specific reasons for non-renewal of membership.

At this point, the reader is reminded of the aim of this study, which was to garner the views of a homogeneous sample, comprised of former presidents of the industry's professional institute, regarding the state of public relations in this country. Following from this, the research question investigated by this study was that of how the presidents of Prisa who have served terms of office since 1994, view the current state of public relations in South Africa. The respondents' collective answer to the research question is summarised as follows:

- South African public relations is a globally recognised entity, with major opportunities in terms of globalisation as well as national and international networks which can be activated. South African public relations is in need of a professional board with formal registration procedures, along with a well-defined scope of practice in order to sophisticate and redefine the public relations profession.
- The political change in South Africa created opportunities for the public relations profession, but political and government fraud, corruption, media spinning, media untruths, propaganda, technology and competition hamper proactive engagement with these opportunities, resulting in scepticism towards public relations.
- Social media present an opportunity to reach broader and diverse communities (specifically the youth), but will not replace mainstream media as technology and access are defined by economic status. Social media platforms should be embraced, but "control" is an issue; therefore, they should be well managed with proper organisational policies in place to avoid corruption of an organisation's reputation and a decline in quality.
- Prisa is internationally recognised, offering a blueprint for the African situation. Prisa gained ground in terms of transformation but lost ground in terms of membership. Prisa promotes BEE, and developed standards for the services Seta, working with Fapra9 and has also developed an educational arm in terms of a CPD system. Prisa was proactive in terms of establishing public relations as a profession in South Africa, and should make use of opportunities in terms of sharing knowledge. It should also utilise and capitalise on existing expertise (i.e. past presidents).

- Regarding professionalisation, public relations requires legislation and a set of standards for practitioners. However, it is felt that – owing to freedom of association – people cannot be forced to join the Institute and follow these standards and code of conduct. Instead, Prisa should work on becoming a cutting-edge association so that people would want to be associated with it. Public relations, marketing and advertising bodies should merge into one regulatory, inter-disciplinary community council for well co-ordinated and integrated public relations products.

- Key issues facing public relations

What is required:

- Credibility and role models for young people
- Marketing
- Strategy
- Education/knowledge/experience/research-based interventions
- Clear professional code of conduct
- Remaining abreast of social media and changes
- Shared value system through Prisa
- Strategic business acumen
- A focus on becoming global players
- Public, government and private awareness of Prisa

What should be managed:

- Declining trust of media and media corruption
 - Uneven stakeholder environment
- There are widely divergent opinions about ethics in public relations. The majority of the respondents are of the opinion that the ethical dimension of public relations is non-existent or of a poor standard, which correlates with the lack of ethics encountered in all societal spheres, while others feel that few ethical problems have arisen until now. It is believed that formal registration with a professional board would assist in tackling the ethical problems in the profession.
 - In South Africa, there is not only a crisis of credibility; there are also crises of relevancy, legitimacy and reputation, which can be addressed (i) through knowledge and a reference base in Prisa; (ii) by adhering to the principle that institutional responsibility should not be taken on as the public relations profession's responsibility; and (iii) by using strategic business language instead of tactical language.

- Regarding the term “public relations” vis-à-vis “communication” / “corporate communication”, there is a difference of opinion: four out of nine stated that the name (public relations) should be retained, while others expressed the opinion that one should not “play semantics”; that one should “just do the job professionally” and “be proud and confident” and call the profession “whatever is convenient at that point in time”.
- As to the relationship between public relations and communication: opinions differ in this regard too, ranging from the conviction that public relations rightfully comprises the over-arching term, to the belief that professional public relations consultants understand that communication is what lubricates the project plan. The concepts of “synergy” and “merging”, “co-creating each other” and “dynamic relationship” are used together with “integration”, while the term “communication management” appears, together with an emphasis on “business perspective”.

CLOSING ARGUMENT

In many respects this study underscores the fact that not much has changed in the public relations industry, as is pointed out in the Golden Jubilee edition of *Communica* (2007), in an article entitled “Issues don’t really change”. The first few issues listed in the article are mentioned here to illustrate the researcher’s point:

- Should the profession be called public relations or communication?
- Is it a profession or an industry – or both?
- The perception and image of public relations among the general public and those who should know better.
- Low entry levels to the industry and the perception that anyone can do “PR”.
- The relationship between public relations people and the media, including spin.
- The recognition of the value of good public relations, especially at boardroom level.
- The overlaps and boundaries between public relations, marketing and advertising.
- The skills and qualities necessary for a good public relations practitioner.

So, regarding the research question of how the former presidents of Prisa view the current state of public relations in South Africa: not all of Prisa’s former presidents necessarily view and define the *status quo* in terms of a crisis, although a number of them – including Prisa’s current president – make explicit reference to the existence of such a crisis. Therefore, in conclusion, one could argue that there is a recurring crisis of credibility in the South African public relations industry.

Endnotes

¹ The equally important role played by the Public Relations Consultants' Chapter of Prisa (PRCC), specifically in shaping the consultancy sphere of public relations in South Africa, must be acknowledged. However, given Prisa's longer existence and broader base of representation, it was decided to restrict this study to Prisa and the views of its presidents. Also, the original scope of and timeline for this study precluded the involvement of the PRCC.

² See the Golden Jubilee issue of *Communika* (May 2007) for a valuable summation of the history of public relations in South Africa.

³ See *Communika* (2007: 17).

⁴ Refer to the discussion of membership preceding figure 2 for an explanation of these acronyms which denote levels of individual membership in Prisa.

⁵ Mixael de Kock provided invaluable insight and the concept "crisis of credibility", as it is used in this article, and its title is credited to him.

⁶ The interview schedule is available from the author: zroodt@mweb.co.za

⁷ The latest King Report adds a new perspective to future corporate governance and the corporate communication profession in South Africa. For the first time it includes a separate chapter on Stakeholder Relationship Management (*Communika* 2009: 9; see also *Communika* 2010: 10.)

⁸ Prisa's position as a founding member of the Global Alliance for Public Relations Communication Management (GA) in 1998 – and later as the secretariat – firmly established Prisa as a leading professional body, not only in Africa, but in the world (*Communika* 2007: 4).

⁹ The Federation of African Public Relations Associations (Fapra) is the umbrella body of all national public relations associations in Africa.

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