

Public relations, post-truth, and grand challenges: better research toward social value

Relações públicas, pós-verdade e grandes desafios: uma melhor
pesquisa para o valor social

Relaciones públicas, posverdad y grandes desafíos: una mejor
investigación hacia el valor social



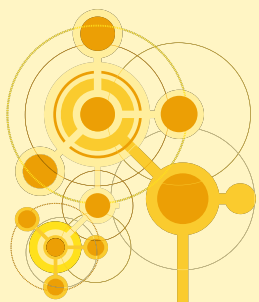
Thomas Stoeckle

- Bournemouth University & PR Academy
- tstoeckle@bournemouth.ac.uk



Ana Adi

- Quadriga University of Applied Sciences, Berlin, Germany
- ana.adi@quadriga.eu



Abstract

The historical trajectory of the field, its neoliberal foundation, its organizational centrality, and an excessive confidence resulting from a quantitative and pragmatic approach are some of the reasons why it is believed that Public Relations are ill-prepared for the challenges imposed by the hypercomplex environments that emerge from the postmodern social context. This study proposes a revised and expanded planning logic to perform, measure, and evaluate communication activities with a focus on stakeholders to face large scale issues.

KEYWORDS: GRAND CHALLENGES • STAKEHOLDERS • POST-TRUTH • SOCIAL VALUE • MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORKS.

Sumário

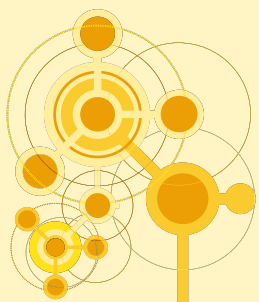
A trajetória histórica do campo, sua fundamentação neoliberal, a centralidade organizacional e uma confiança excessiva resultante de uma abordagem quantitativa e pragmática são algumas das razões pelas quais acredita-se que as Relações Públicas não estão preparadas para os desafios impostos por ambientes hipercomplexos que emergem do contexto social pós-moderno. O presente artigo propõe uma lógica de planejamento revisada e ampliada para execução, mensuração e avaliação das atividades de comunicação com foco nos stakeholders para o enfrentamento de grandes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: GRANDES MUDANÇAS • PARTES INTERESSADAS • PÓS-VERDADE • VALOR SOCIAL • MODELOS DE MENSURAÇÃO.

Résumen

La trayectoria histórica del campo, su fundamento neoliberal, la centralidad organizacional y un exceso de confianza producto de un enfoque cuantitativo y pragmático son algunas de las razones por las que se cree que las Relaciones Públicas no están preparadas para los desafíos que imponen los entornos hipercomplejos que emergen. del contexto social posmoderno. Este artículo propone una lógica de planificación revisada y ampliada para la ejecución, medición y evaluación de actividades de comunicación con un enfoque en las partes interesadas para enfrentar problemas de gran escala.

PALABRAS CLAVE: GRANDES CAMBIOS • STAKEHOLDERS • POSVERDAD • VALOR SOCIAL • MODELOS DE MEDICIÓN.



INTRODUCTION

Society faces complex problems, such as COVID-19, global warming, seemingly increasing political polarization, and multiple issues related to diversity in society — also referred to as grand challenges (Howard-Grenville; Spengler, 2022) — which are increasingly difficult to manage in a post-truth environment (Conrad et al., 2023; Fuller, 2020). Public relations (PR) seems to exacerbate rather than improve matters (Ihlen et al., 2019; Thompson, 2023). Recently, the authors of this paper have argued that PR is unprepared for the new quality of challenges facing modern societies (Adi; Stoeckle, 2023). Here, we explore the shortcomings in the theoretical and conceptual understanding of such problems, as well as in the use of data and analysis frameworks to address them.

We develop our argument in two ways: first, by showing that PR theorizing (and subsequently, education and practice) struggles with grasping the scope of the challenges to it and second, by showing that the existing planning and evaluation frameworks, with some revision and expansion, can help address those challenges in a sufficiently holistic and comprehensive way, thus contributing to organizations' generation of positive social impact and broad social value.

Thus, this study explores the role of PR in the discourse around grand challenges and its social impact and value from three complementary perspectives:

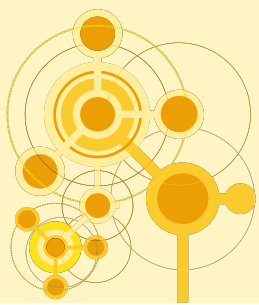
- First, we will describe how and why PR continues to be a modernist neoliberal practice, upholding the prevailing 'business paradigm' (Demetrious, 2022).
- Second, we will explore how modernist quantitative solutionism (Hulme, 2020) generates resource-intensive but ultimately misguided initiatives that respond with facts to questions of values (Jasanoff; Simmet, 2017).
- And third, we will outline how PR can become fit for emerging and evolving challenges by proposing — based on existing concepts (Macnamara, 2023b) — a research-led planning and measurement framework that is adequate for the challenges ahead.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Academic research should assess a given state of knowledge before embarking on a journey to expand that knowledge. This study takes inspiration from Mary Ann Ferguson's 1984 influential conference paper on paradigms and theory-building in public relations — eventually published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* (Ferguson, 2018). Its abstract states that "agreement on a paradigm focus for public relations scholarship would greatly enhance the probability of productive theory development." However, until PR scholars agree on the direction research and theory building should take, "there may be much activity we call research in public relations, but there will not be much theory development" (p. 164). Ferguson's 1984 argument remains ahead of time, moving beyond organization-centric (or even audience-centric) perspectives with the "assumption that the relationship is the prime issue of concern, not the parties" (p. 172).

The approach to theory-building we take

- first assesses the leading paradigms guiding public relations practice and education in light of changing societal conditions;
- second, it describes and justifies the need for a paradigm shift, and
- third, it suggests how such a paradigm shift can be supported by a new model of data-led communication planning, measurement, and evaluation, focusing on the relationship PR has with society and integrating an inside-out (social impact) with an outside-in (social value) perspective.



To achieve these aims, our review of academic research focuses on the evolution of PR as a business practice before situating such practice in a post-truth environment of public discourse. Then, we will explore the concept of grand challenges — societal problems which are highly complex, unstable, and thus very difficult to predict — that affect stakeholders with often conflicting values (Gehman; Etzion; Ferraro, 2022), in itself a serious problem for communicators. Lastly, we address the challenge of defining and generating social value in a post-truth, multi-stakeholder environment.

To Ferguson's point that theory is "a way to understand events and to predict future events based upon research findings supporting the theory" (2018, p. 165), we add that accelerating innovation of digital technology together with continuous societal evolution requires PR to not only adapt its practices but also to fundamentally reconsider its theoretical underpinning. To lend credibility to the claim that the organizational purpose of PR has social impact and adds social value, "sense-making must be grounded in recognition of its fundamental political potential as a discursive intervention in public life" (Edwards, 2021, p. 178).

Our suggestion for a metamodern, circular-reflexive expansion of modernist, linear planning, measurement, and evaluation models is meant as a modest contribution to this continuous process of sense-making, theory-building, and practical application, echoing Taylor and Kent's recent 'call to arms' for "public relations scholars to seek out and create new theoretical frameworks and push theory-building and the practice forward to better contribute to society" (Taylor; Kent, 2023, p. 103).

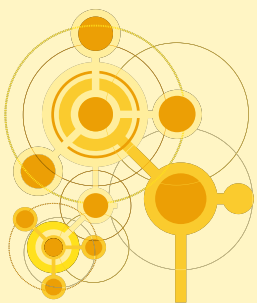
The history and present of PR as a 'neoliberal practice'

From the early 1920s and Edward Bernays' rise to prominence in the field (Bernays, 1923, 1928) to the early 2010s, classical PR underwent a long period of evolution, "characterised by a mixture of practice and theoretical orthodoxies, which saw PR as largely organisational and corporatist" (Thompson, 2020, p. 3). This modernist grounding is central to PR education and practice to this day, following principles that "include a focus on goals and objectives or management-by-objectives, breaking down into more and more measurable parts the process through which public relations can achieve such outcomes as behavior change, but also change in awareness, comprehension, and attitudes" (Toth, 2002, p. 245). A recent intervention by Macnamara, however, shows that this belief in the ability of PR to achieve data-driven impact on attitudes and behavior is rather optimistic since "reports continue to focus on outputs and algorithm-generated fake impact scores, rather than genuine outcomes and impact" (2023a, p. 1).

Today, critical observers, such as Demetrious, see the 80+ years of classical PR as a period in which "neoliberal reason, interwoven with public relations language practices, is systematically embedded in the public imagination, in ways that enable cultures of misinformation to proliferate, as well as to suppress and misdirect public debate" (Demetrious, 2022, p. 9). Curry Jansen makes a similar point by highlighting how PR is nurturing "public receptivity to market values, neoliberal policies and practices" (Curry Jansen, 2017, p. 15). Thus, the organizational and corporatist focus and role of PR in upholding neoliberal (business) principles conflict with learning and evolution — critical capabilities in a fast-evolving environment.

Society is facing 'grand challenges'

The modern(ist) modus operandi of PR — built on a Cartesian-Newtonian belief in scientific truth, quantitative methodology, and scientific management (McKie, 2001, p. 80) — not only determines how education and practice evolve its "familiar troika — a body of knowledge, ethics and certification" (Bowman; Hendy, 2019, p. 336) but also how these are applied in practice in difficult circumstances such as crises. PR has an entire branch dedicated to crises (Coombs; Holladay, 2012; Fearn-Banks, 2001; Regester; Larkin, 2008; Tachkova; Coombs, 2022). However, not only during the COVID-19 pandemic, the "complexity of the interconnected crises has shown conventional crisis management and the rules and norms of crisis communication ill-equipped for the challenge" (Lilleker; Stoeckle, 2021, p. 2). Gilpin's critical analysis of crisis communication and complexity leads her to find the need for "a more expansive and nuanced exploration of the principles of complexity and how they can aid both in conceptualizing crisis emergence and evolution" (Gilpin, 2023, p. 141).



Given that we now seem to live in times of 'permacrises' — a phrase Collins Dictionaries declared to be the 2022 Word of the Year (Jakobson et al., 2023) —, in a "world of hypercomplexity, hypermobility, and hypervelocity" (Susen, 2015, p. 122), we must reconsider how PR understands and theorizes complexity, risk, and uncertainty and the role it plays in these issues. PR must address grand challenges — a management science concept covering hypercomplex, multifaceted societal/global challenges (Gehman; Etzion; Ferraro, 2022) —, which "overlap (at least superficially) with other perspectives such as wicked problems and volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity" (p. 261). Of particular importance is the distinction between *manageable uncertainty*, reflected in so-called VUCA approaches to leadership and problem-solving (Worley; Jules, 2020) — which are based on classic risk management principles (Engemann; Engemann; Scott, 2022) — and *unmanageable uncertainty*, as per Rittel and Webber's concept of wicked problems (1973), for which there is no "enumerable (or an exhaustively describable) set of potential solutions, nor is there a well-described set of permissible operations that may be incorporated into the plan" (p. 164). The most intractable societal grand challenges have unmanageable uncertainty at their core. In its modernist modus operandi, PR is unable to comprehend, let alone adequately respond to, such challenges. Its alignment with corporate performance and the aforementioned 'focus on goals and objectives or management-by-objectives' fails to grasp the breadth and depth of the issues at hand.

Modernist management thinking leads to 'solutionism'

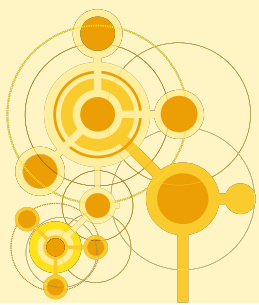
The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG) areas and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a case in point. The "ratings, rankings, and indexes from 130 rating agencies... 237 unique indicators in over 600 corporate ESG indicators" (Veenstra; Ellemers, 2020, p. 1), and 17 SDGs with 169 targets offer a constant risk of organizations "greenwashing" and "impact washing" their activities by selective reporting (Lashitew, 2021). Hulme finds the practice of climate solutionism a performative act of wrapping problems in fact-based frameworks and relying on technology to consider values and cultures: "Climate solutionism, driven by metrics, masks the contested politics and value diversity that lie behind different personal and collective choices—who wins, who loses, and whose values count" (Hulme, 2020, p. 310). This kind of "technocratic solutionism that seeks engineering solutions to political questions" (Horowitz; Remes, 2021, p. 3) is particularly problematic in a post-truth environment in which communicators employ "tactics designed to appeal to emotion rather than reason and that use theatrical-style performances to gain attention and influence" (Thompson, 2023, p. 171).

PR and post-truth: acting with good and bad intentions

Many observers argue that we live in an era of post-truth (Conrad et al., 2023; Fuller, 2018, 2020; Rowinski, 2020). Thompson's comprehensive assessment of *Post-Truth Public Relations* concludes that PR is part of the problem: "PR is a trade that has made money from the epistemological fragility of post-truth" (2020, p. 154). Thompson sees the historical roots of post-truth in an inauthentic rhetoric of persuasion first practiced by the Sophists of ancient Greece (2020, p. 90ff.), who helped paying clients win arguments and who honed their skills by arguing either side of an argument with equal mastery. Fuller calls this "the birth of rhetoric as the crucible of the post-truth imaginary" (Fuller, 2018, p. 28).

This critique opposes a more idealistic, free-speech democratic notion of PR, in which it contributes to society via the marketplace of ideas (Coombs; Holladay, 2014, p. 28f.), nevertheless qualified by comparisons with the legal profession: "As with the law, public relations can be twisted and misused. However, that does not diminish its overall contribution to society" (Coombs; Holladay, 2014, p. 28f.). Bowen adds an ethical perspective in advocating for the positive social role of PR in guiding ethical leadership and reflective management (Bowen, 2010).

However, in theorizing the relation between PR and post-truth, idealistic positions seem to be the exception: Edwards describes the "normalisation of organised lying" (2021, p. 170) and how "the construction of a shadowy 'other' (the 'bad' disinformation actor) in debates about fake news implies that visible, professional communication is 'good' communication, and allows the industry to sidestep



responsibility for the current situation" (p. 169). Edwards specifically addresses the sophistic role of PR, simultaneously generating and then ostensibly counteracting disinformation (Edwards, 2021, p. 177). Academic post-truth discourse increasingly articulates the both-sides-ism of professional services, as illustrated by a recent polemic on *The Big Con* of consulting industries (Mazzucato; Collington, 2023).

From the perspective of "social and discursive construction grand challenges" (Howard-Grenville; Spengler, 2022, p. 289), the post-truth association and role of PR in defining and creating social value is instrumental. For example, adequately addressing organized lying requires a clear understanding of the opposite of lying — truth-telling. However, in a post-truth environment, who defines what is and what is not truth? With whom does 'modal power' lie, the definition of the rules of the game, the "sphere of what is possible in society" (Fuller, 2018, p. 29)? For example, when we think about common (as opposed to vested) interests — how are those calls made, who makes them, and as a result, what counts as social value?

Social impact and social value: two sides of the same coin

Several interconnected challenges relate to the understanding of social value. The first concerns the difference between social value and social impact, which we understand as two sides of the same coin:

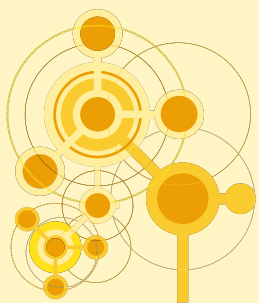
- Social impact is an inside-out measure from the perspective of the organization
- Social value is an outside-in measure from the perspective of the environment of an organization and stakeholders

Any form of research and analysis to plan, perform, and evaluate social impact- and/or value-related communication activities must reflect that relationship, and not only that: it must also reflect the fact that stakeholders have their own stakeholders, and so do their stakeholders. Current models for stakeholder analysis and prioritization either advance an organization-centric view or suggest an issue-centric view. However, the complexity of the stakeholder environment is lost due to the focus on first-degree relationships, interactions, and/or claims in a strategic management perspective (Grunig, 2011; Rawlins, 2006).

A second challenge arises from the clash between a modernist belief in facts and 'following science,' and the postmodernist, post-truth reality of people's values, group identification, and beliefs (Adi; Stoeckle, 2023). Thus, managing grand challenges is less a problem of (process) management than a problem of value-driven communication with many perspectives and interests. Hulme makes this point for climate change storytelling: "Consensus messaging, for example, fails to work because risk is socially constructed and value driven" (Hulme, 2020, p. 309). Therefore, rather than focusing on a singular, standardized social value, we must consider multitudes of social values, thus further complicating the arithmetic. Classic, reflective models of ethical public relations management with a focus on authenticity and transparency, such as the one put forward by Bowen (2010), while well-intentioned, are no longer sufficient. This also relates back to 'solutionism:' if the problem is misunderstood, the solutions can never be adequate. This leads to a category error between what can be grasped by 'hard' aggregated metrics and indices and what can only be grasped as 'soft' values. It also creates an illusion of control that neglects unintended consequences and emergent effects (unknown unknowns), especially in multi-stakeholder environments with competing views on social impact and social value (see Fig. 3. Three scales of social value/social impact assessment).

Consequently, not only do we need to consider

- who defines social impact,
- how social impact is defined (and then generated),
- who defines social value,
- how social value is defined, and
- how social value is experienced,



but also — from the perspective of the 'listening organization' (Macnamara, 2022)

- what do my stakeholders want and, related to that,
- what is the organization prepared to give, and
- what am I (as an individual) prepared to give?

Operationalizing social value

Neither attempts within PR scholarship and practice, efforts from other disciplines — such as the blended value concept (Emerson, 2010), which aims to combine social, economic, and environmental value components — nor the triple bottom-line approach for financial accounting (Savitz; Weber, 2012) manage to conceptually move beyond an organization-centric perspective. Too often, claims to 'put the stakeholder at the centre' are still just "shades of greenwashing" (de Jong; Huluba; Beldad, 2020).

Social Value International (SVI), a global network with members in 60 countries focused on social value and impact, promotes eight principles that contain both the organization and stakeholder perspectives in a way that forms a viable basis for a comprehensive model (SVI, 2022):

- *Principle 1: Involve Stakeholders*
- *Principle 2: Understand What Changes*
- *Principle 3: Value the Things That Matter*
- *Principle 4: Only Include What Is Material*
- *Principle 5: Do Not Overclaim*
- *Principle 6: Be Transparent*
- *Principle 7: Verify the Result*
- *Principle 8: Be Responsive*

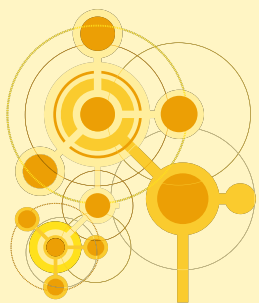
The value of the SVI principles lies in their focus on the relativity of stakeholder perspectives and their emphasis on the range of social impacts and values emerging from any activity. None of this is new. However, building these different perspectives — organization-centric social impact as well as stakeholder-centric perceived social value, including positive and negative, desired and undesired, planned and accidental change — into a single research framework remains to be done. However, some recent conceptual models (Capizzo, 2023; Macnamara, 2023a) lay the groundwork for such a framework.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

We propose an update to current listening, planning, measurement, evaluation, and learning models (Macnamara, 2023b) to include a focus on stakeholders and considerations on social value and social impact as proposed by Social Value International. In doing so, we argue PR will be better equipped to address societal grand challenges.

Communication planning with M&E frameworks

In *Evaluating Public Communication*, Macnamara (2018) describes how models for planning, performing, and then evaluating communication go back a long way, to Harold Lasswell's 1948 formula 'who says what to whom, in which channel, with what effect' (p. 57), if not to the original AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action) model from the beginning of the 20th century (p. 73). Simple media monitoring in the form of collecting press clippings as a form of measuring PR effectiveness can be traced

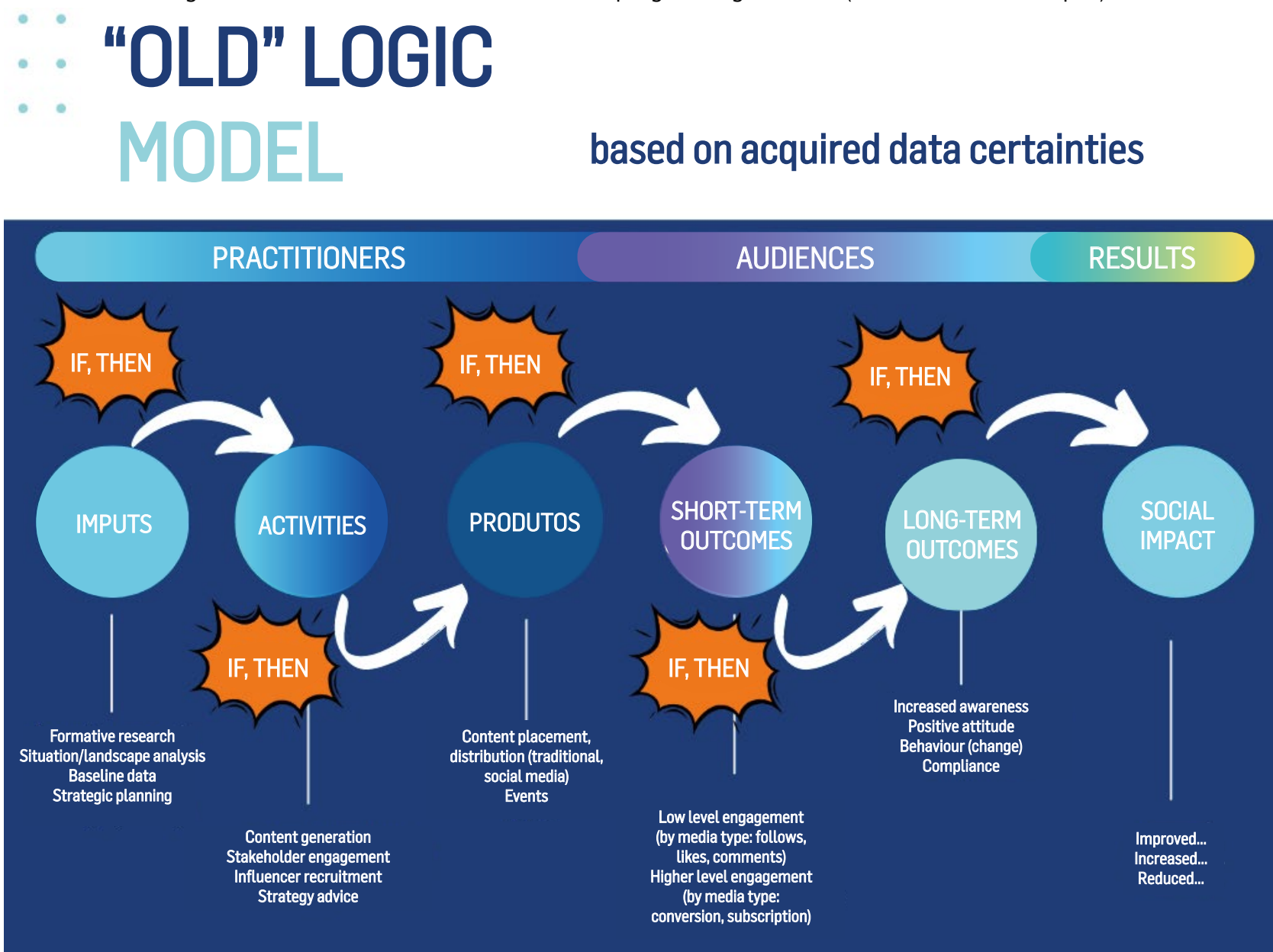


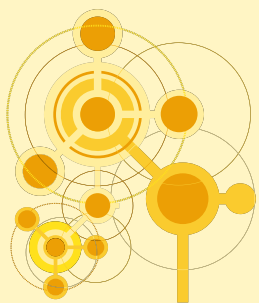
back even further (to the 19th century), but the step change toward systematic PR planning and evaluation models happened with the application of input/output logic models to communication (p. 43ff.) from the 1980s onward.

The current English language industry standard is the AMEC Integrated Evaluation Framework (Buhmann; Macnamara; Zerfass, 2019), and both AMEC and the Institute for Public Relations Measurement Commission (of which both authors are members) are playing key roles in establishing, publicizing, and teaching measurement and evaluation frameworks (Macnamara, 2023a, p. 5f.). However, as both Macnamara (2022, 2023b) and Capizzo (2022, 2023) discuss in recent studies, existing measurement and evaluation frameworks lack the nuance, breadth, and depth required to reflect the complexity of organizational environments — especially when it comes to grand challenges. These frameworks prescribe neutral categories such as input, output, and outcomes, and although they claim a focus on stakeholders, they are conceived from the perspective of the organization and in a linear manner that implies a logical, incremental progression in which the completion of one step logically leads to the beginning of the next step (see Fig 1, below).

Macnamara's 'meta-model' proposes expanding “the basic program logic model by duplicating the five stages and flipping the duplicated program logic to represent communication from stakeholders, publics, and society (i.e., a reversed program logic model operating in parallel with the traditional organization-to-public model)” (Macnamara, 2022, p. 64), whereas Capizzo states that current approaches lack “full organizational understanding of stakeholder needs amid the complexity of intractable and wicked problems” (Capizzo, 2022, p. 10). Our proposed framework builds on these ideas.

Figure 1. Based on Macnamara's 'dissected program logic model' (Macnamara, 2023a, p. 4)





RESULTS (DESCRIPTION OF MODEL AND APPLICATION)

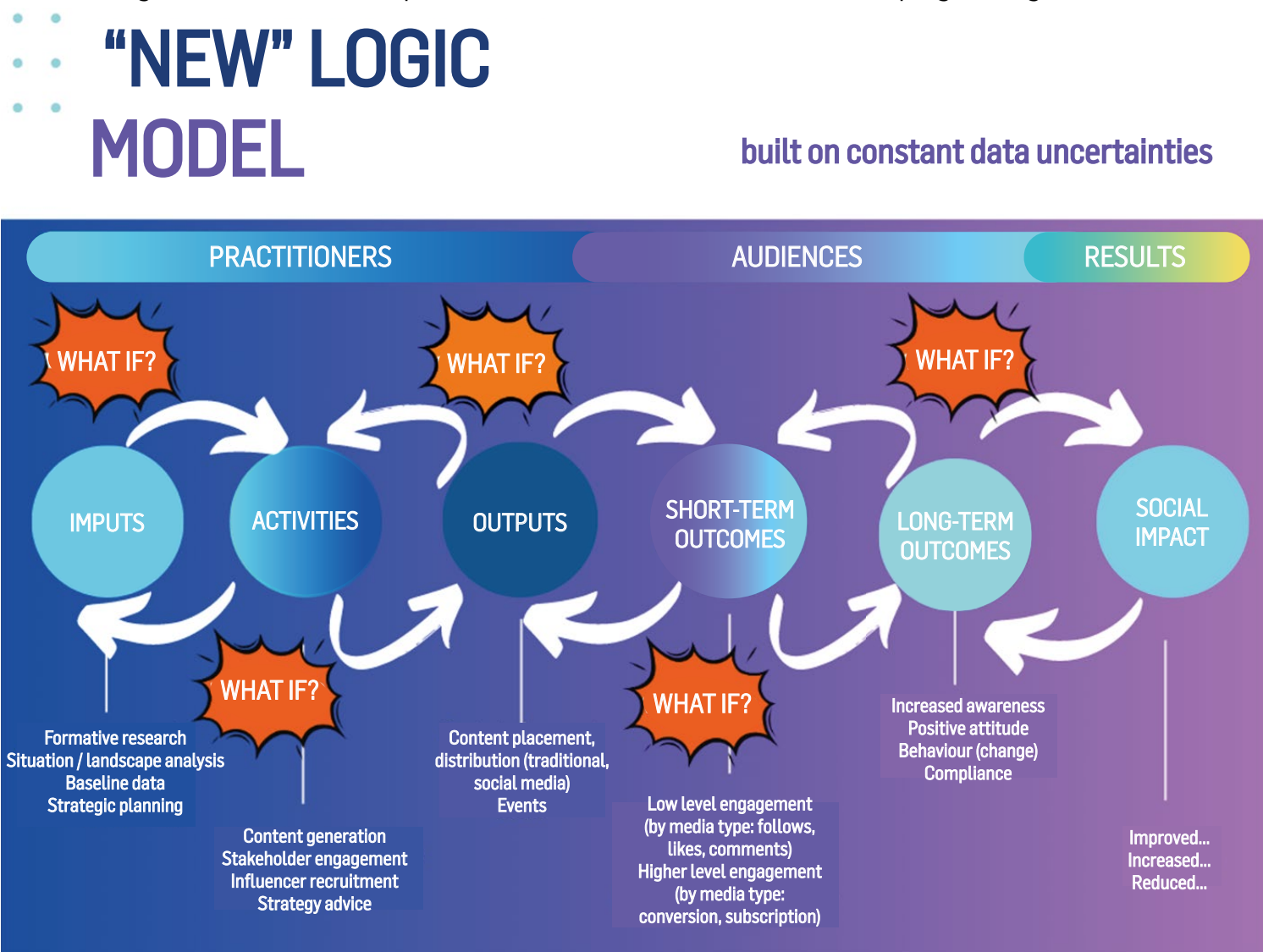
A more future-proof communication planning, performance, and evaluation framework, therefore, must accommodate an evolving understanding of the complex organization-stakeholder relationships and its high levels of uncertainty. Under such conditions, managerial control of processes and outcomes is at best an aspiration.

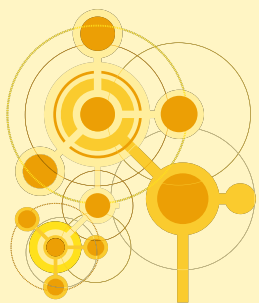
Combining communication planning frameworks and stakeholder analysis

We propose to revise and expand the existing measurement and evaluation frameworks from their classic 'if-then' logic to an 'if-then plus what-if' logic. While keeping directional flow from inputs via activities to outputs, outcomes, and ultimately impact, constantly asking 'what if' builds continuous engagement with uncertainty ('unknown unknowns') into the model by providing and including tangential development spaces and revision loops. Insights, decisions, and solutions are thus only ever as good as one's current knowledge base and data evidence, which might change (sometimes dramatically) at any point (Fig. 2, below).

Reflective learning is built into the process at each transitional point from one stage to the next. This may change the knowledge- and decision-making base for anything that follows, which may affect outcomes — as Rittel and Webber stated in 1973: "every attempt to reverse a decision or to correct for the undesired consequences poses another set of wicked problems, which are in turn subject to the same dilemmas" (Rittel; Webber, 1973, p. 163).

Figure 2. Modified and expanded version of Macnamara's 'dissected program logic model'



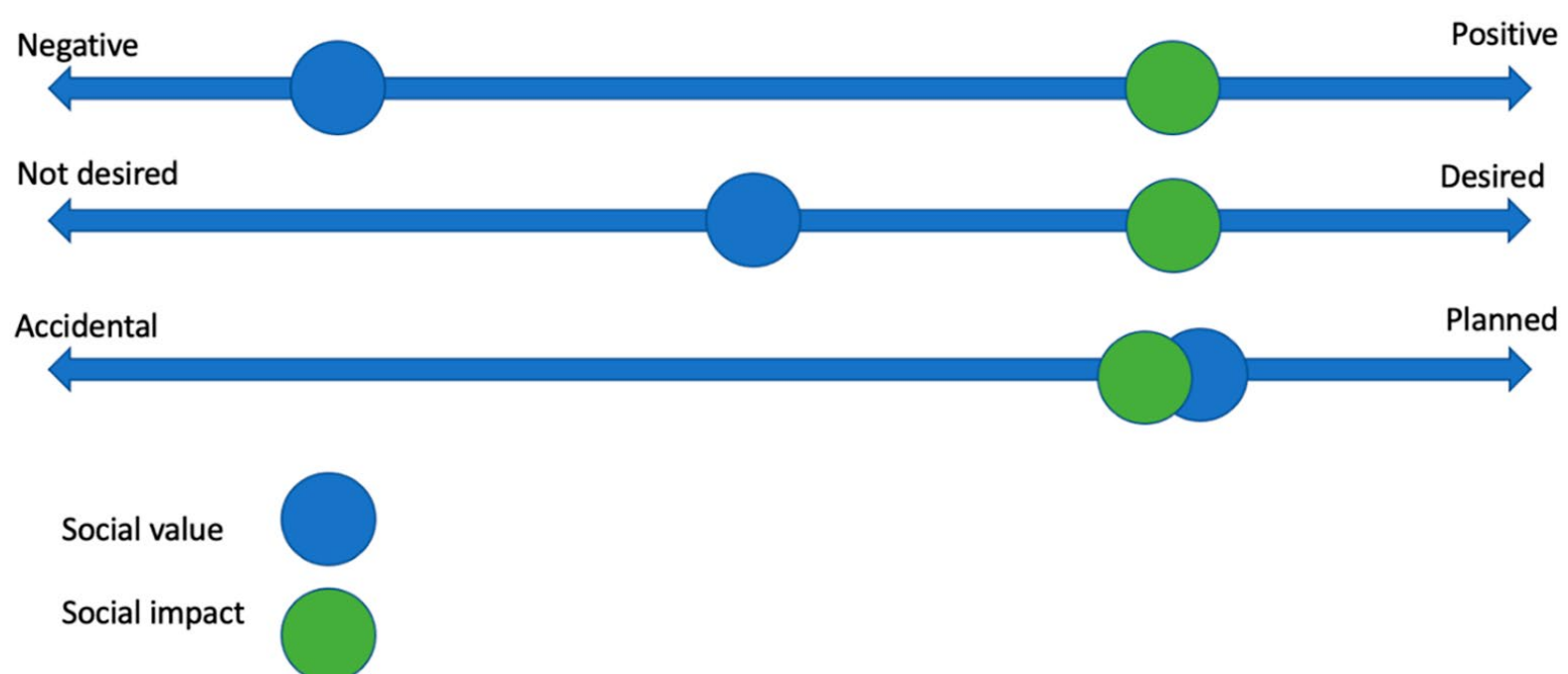


The complexity of competing impacts and values

To guide the research, inquiry, analysis, and reflection necessary to implement the 'if-then plus what-if' approach, both social impact and social value must be embedded in the process. In this sense, unlike previous iterations that simply reported impact — which can lead to reporting bias and greenwashing (Santos; Coelho; Marques, 2023), we recommend considering three variables to assess social impact and social value: negative/positive, undesired/desired, accidental/planned (Fig.3, below). As per Rittel and Webber (1973), these perceived outcomes are “inherently wicked,” i.e., impossible to predict or control and relative to stakeholders and issues. While social impact is an assessment that can be carried out from the perspective of the organization (input-output-effect), social value requires stakeholder engagement and research (such as surveys or social listening, trend watching or policy research). Identifying and assessing these values and impacts with different stakeholders and comparing results can help organizations and stakeholders understand and assess different perceptions and experiences of value.

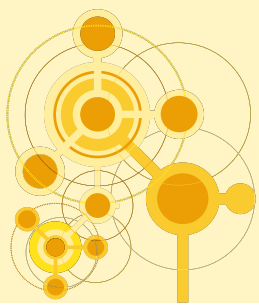
Our proposed 'if-then plus what-if' approach to research-led planning and performance of communication activities helps address cases in which social impact and social values among stakeholders are misaligned. It provides conceptual space for organizations to identify and reflect on actions and consequences. The (over)simplicity of modernist management frameworks with their illusion of fact-based process control is thus replaced by a model that integrates the complexity and relativity of value-based stakeholder positions. This framework applies to both formative and summative research. As a planning and listening tool, it can help establish a benchmark for social impact and social value (both in terms of what to pursue and not to pursue, of what is desirable and what is not).

Figure 3. Three scales of social value/social impact assessment



Better models are insufficient — mindsets must also change

In the final book of his trilogy on *Using Data Better* (Knowles, 2018, 2020, 2023), Sam Knowles explains how asking smarter questions leads to more profound and relevant insights based on the six universal principles of listening, simplicity, openness, preparation, open-mindedness, and curiosity (Knowles, 2023, p. 268). The only principle we would add is



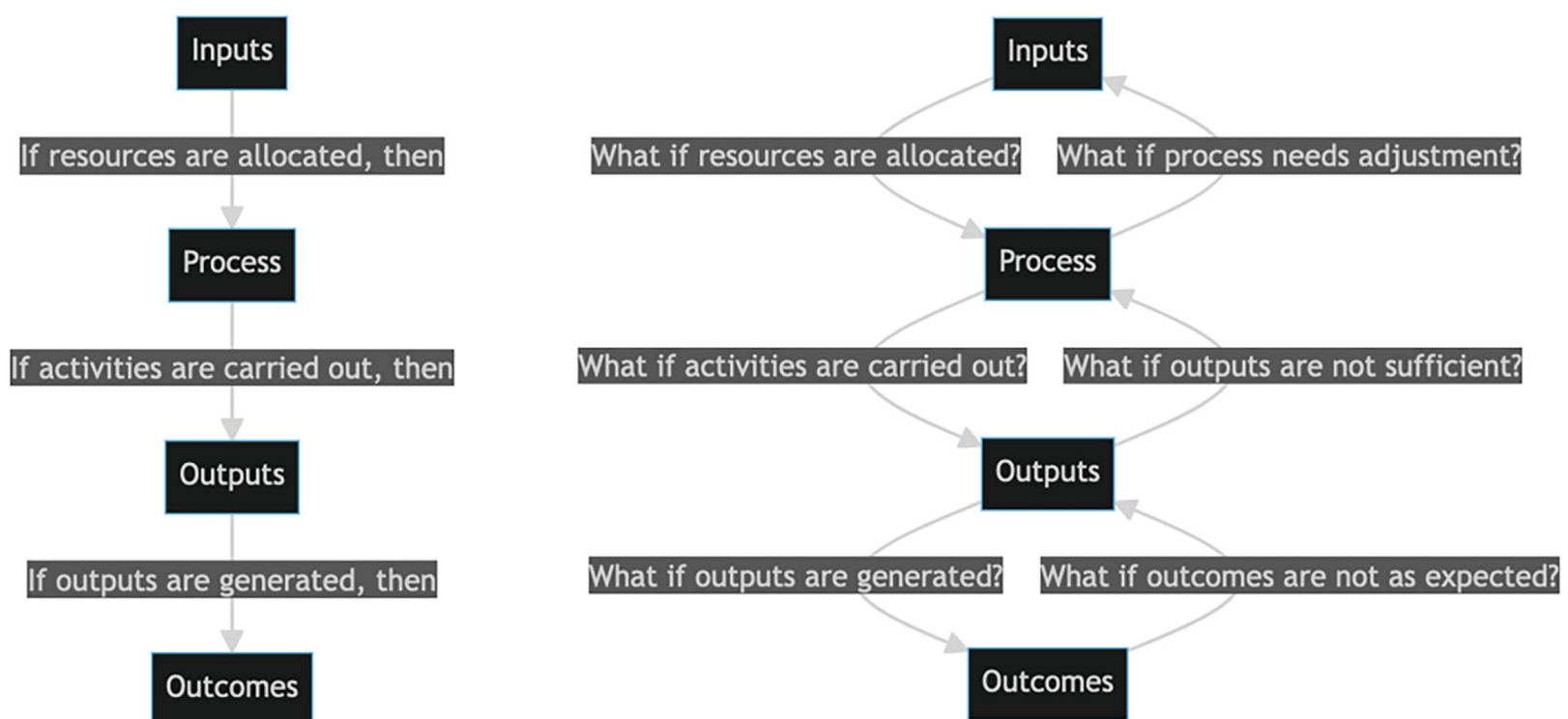
humility: Josephson Storm's outline of metamodern theory-building calls for "humble knowledge" in the social sciences (Josephson Storm, 2021).

Following Meyer (Meyer, 2021; Meyer; Barker, 2020), we have argued for PR practitioners to become "metamodern responsible persuaders" (Adi; Stoeckle, 2023), moving beyond modernist positivism and postmodern relativism. Corsa argues that "we ought to embrace a polyphonic, metamodernist, environmentalist grand narrative" (Corsa, 2018, p. 267). Our new uncertainty-based listening, planning, and evaluation framework requires practitioners whose approach to generating and applying knowledge is one of curious humility rather than incurious hubris. This means that classic leadership models will also require revision and adjustment — as is already happening based on the mixed experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Oliver; Pfarrer; Neville, 2022; Witzel, 2022)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Under conditions of post-truth discourse and faced with societal grand challenges, PR struggles to contribute to organizations' efforts toward positive social impact and generate social value for all stakeholders. Research- and insight-led planning and evaluation frameworks support classic corporate interests and can incorporate stakeholder interests to a certain extent. However, modernist and postmodernist limitations in the conception of knowledge generation and application mean that the answers to complex questions fall short of requirements and will always leave parts of the stakeholder network dissatisfied. While modernist approaches lead to solutionism, which fails to embrace diverse political and values-based arguments, postmodernist claims for all voices to be heard and given equal billing will paralyze organizations and prevent decision-making. Both approaches neither lead to learning and evolution nor cope well with uncertainty.

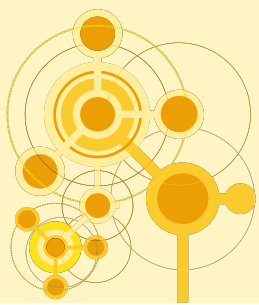
Figure 4. Linear vs circular logic models: 'what if' is conducive to learning and coping with uncertainty



'Modernist' linear logic model

'Metamodern' circular / feedback logic model

The model we propose gives space for both organizational and stakeholder representation by embracing and dismissing the centrality of either. Instead, representing multiple views on issues and actions and on potential impacts and values invites



comparison and reflection, promotes agility rather than rigidity, and more closely represents a VUCA environment. Learning is built into the logic of the model, as is coping with uncertainty.

Thoughts on future research and application

Our proposed 'if-then plus what-if' model is no panacea but it contributes to metamodern theorizing as an attempt to "help cope with fragmentation created by a lack of coherence or convergence ... and inspire the sustainable development of social sciences as a social practice" (Pipere; Mārtinsons, 2022, p. 16). We see a range of possible applications of our proposed framework with implications for organizations and their stakeholder environments, individual practitioners, and the profession. These refer to expanding and adapting the architecture of listening proposed by Macnamara and others to cope with hypercomplex and grand problems and to systemic change around and in PR that would enable individual practitioners as well as practice to deliver social value.

Technology, and especially artificial intelligence, will increasingly impact PR practices (Swiatek; Galloway, 2023). The current discussions surrounding large language models and ChatGPT and their impact on all aspects of life (including the PR practice) veer between hope and fear, with critical observers acknowledging a "Promethean dilemma" (Homolak, 2023) of opportunities, risks, and unintended consequences. Setting up more complex social listening mechanisms powered by such technology solutions and more active stakeholder dialogues (going back to traditional public debates) could help establish the desired social value and impact. Yet, as with previous iterations of machine learning and natural language processing, we might not anticipate all consequences (O'Neil, 2016; Seele; Schultz, 2022) and will need to proceed with an 'if-then plus what-if' mindset both in research and practice to balance social impact and social values in a sustainable fashion.

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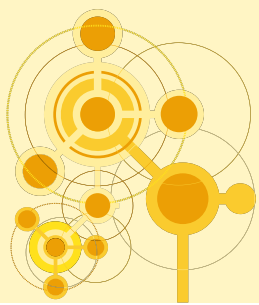
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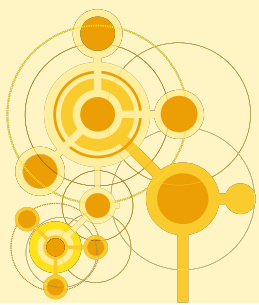
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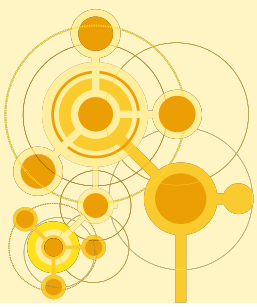
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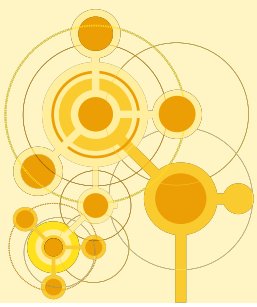
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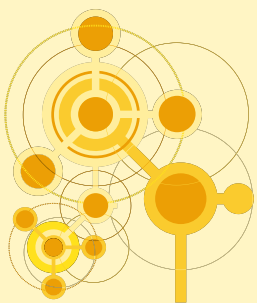
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