

Article

Reconceptualising Public Relations: Its Expanding Role in the Construction of Public Trust and Media Narratives

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Abstract: Public relations (PR) has undergone a significant transformation in response to the increasing complexity of digital communication environments, where public trust and media narratives are continuously negotiated. Traditional models centred on message control are being challenged by participatory media systems, necessitating a reconceptualisation of PR as a dynamic and relational discipline. This study aims to examine the evolving role of public relations in the construction of public trust and the management of media narratives within hybrid and digitally mediated communication landscapes. A qualitative, interpretivist research design was employed using a multiple case study approach. Twelve high-profile cases across corporate, governmental, and non-governmental sectors (2020–2024) were purposively selected. Data were collected from organisational communications, media coverage, and public engagement metrics. Thematic and discourse analyses were conducted to identify patterns in communication strategies, narrative framing, and trust-related outcomes. Three principal themes emerged: strategic transparency, narrative framing and counter-narrative management, and dialogic engagement. Proactive transparency and timely communication were strongly associated with positive trust outcomes, whereas delayed or defensive messaging correlated with negative sentiment. Media narratives were found to evolve through iterative interactions among organisations, media actors, and networked publics, reflecting the dynamics of hybrid media systems. Organisations that actively monitored public perception and engaged in responsive, two-way communication demonstrated greater capacity to influence narrative trajectories and sustain trust. Public relations plays a central role in the co-construction of public trust and media narratives in contemporary communication environments. Effective practice requires a shift towards transparent, dialogic, and adaptive strategies that prioritise continuous engagement and ethical accountability. The findings contribute to theoretical and practical understandings of PR by highlighting its integrative function within complex, decentralised media systems.

Keywords: Public Relations, Transparency, Dialogic Communication, Hybrid Media System, Reputation Management.



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1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) has undergone a substantive transformation over the past three decades, evolving from a predominantly tactical communication function into a strategic discipline central to

organisational legitimacy and societal trust. Classical conceptions—often grounded in the managerial and functional paradigms articulated by scholars such as James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt—emphasised communication symmetry, stakeholder engagement, and reputation management as the cornerstones of effective practice [1]. While these foundational models remain influential, they are increasingly challenged by the complexity of contemporary media ecosystems, characterised by digital fragmentation, algorithmic curation, and participatory publics. The proliferation of social media platforms has reconfigured the production, circulation, and contestation of information, thereby reshaping the conditions under which public trust is constructed and eroded. Trust, understood as a relational and context-dependent construct, is no longer mediated solely through institutional authority or traditional journalism but is co-produced within networked environments where credibility is continuously negotiated [2]. In this context, PR practitioners are required not only to disseminate organisational messages but also to engage in active dialogue, monitor sentiment, and respond to rapidly evolving narratives. The erosion of trust in traditional institutions, coupled with the rise of misinformation and disinformation, has further intensified the strategic importance of PR in safeguarding reputational capital and fostering informed public discourse [3]. Concurrently, media narratives have become increasingly fluid and contested. The agenda-setting function historically associated with legacy media has been supplemented—and in some cases supplanted—by decentralised actors, including influencers, citizen journalists, and algorithm-driven content aggregators. As a result, PR must operate within a hybrid media system, as conceptualised by Andrew Chadwick, where power is distributed across interconnected yet asymmetrical communication networks [4]. Within this system, the capacity to shape narratives depends not only on message design but also on the strategic orchestration of timing, platform selection, and audience engagement. Moreover, the ethical dimensions of PR practice have gained renewed prominence. The imperative to maintain transparency, authenticity, and accountability is increasingly scrutinised by publics who are both sceptical and empowered. Failures in ethical communication—particularly in crisis contexts—can rapidly escalate into reputational crises with far-reaching consequences [5]. Accordingly, contemporary PR is tasked with balancing organisational interests against broader societal expectations, necessitating a reconceptualisation of its role as both a managerial and a normative function. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to reconceptualise public relations as a dynamic and integrative discipline that plays a pivotal role in the construction of public trust and the negotiation of media narratives. By situating PR within the broader socio-digital landscape, the analysis aims to elucidate how evolving communication practices, technological affordances, and shifting audience expectations are redefining the boundaries and responsibilities of the field. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing scholarly debates concerning the strategic, ethical, and societal implications of public relations in the twenty-first century.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study design and theoretical orientation

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to examine the evolving role of public relations in constructing public trust and shaping media narratives. Given the complexity and context-dependent nature of trust formation and narrative construction, a qualitative approach allows for a nuanced exploration of meanings, practices, and discursive strategies. The study is theoretically informed by the two-way symmetrical communication model developed by James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt [1], alongside the hybrid media system framework proposed by Andrew Chadwick [4]. These frameworks provide an integrative lens through which the interaction between organisational communication, media structures, and public engagement can be critically assessed.

2.2 Research approach

A multiple case study strategy was employed to capture variation in PR practices across

different organisational and media contexts. This approach facilitates analytical generalisation rather than statistical inference, enabling the identification of patterns and mechanisms underlying trust-building and narrative management. Cases were purposively selected based on their relevance to high-profile communication environments, including corporate organisations, governmental institutions, and non-governmental organisations that have demonstrated active engagement with digital media platforms.

2.3 Data collection

Data were collected from three principal sources: (1) official organisational communications (e.g., press releases, public statements, and social media outputs), (2) media coverage from established news outlets, and (3) publicly accessible digital discourse, including audience responses and engagement metrics. The sampling frame covered a defined period (e.g., 2020–2024), chosen to reflect heightened digital communication activity and increased public scrutiny associated with global crises and sociopolitical developments.

To enhance data richness and triangulation, a purposive sampling technique was used to identify communication events characterised by significant public engagement or reputational implications. Inclusion criteria comprised visibility in mainstream and digital media, evidence of narrative contestation, and measurable indicators of public response (e.g., amplification, sentiment, or controversy).

2.3 Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic and discourse analysis techniques. Initial open coding was conducted to identify recurrent patterns in messaging strategies, framing devices, and trust-related constructs. This was followed by axial coding to establish relationships between themes, particularly in relation to narrative formation and stakeholder engagement. Discourse analysis was subsequently applied to examine how language, symbolism, and framing contributed to the construction or erosion of public trust within the hybrid media environment.

Analytical rigor was maintained through iterative coding, peer debriefing, and reflexive memo-writing. The integration of theoretical constructs with empirical observations enabled the development of a coherent analytical framework linking PR strategies to broader media dynamics.

2.4 Validity and reliability

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study employed methodological triangulation by integrating multiple data sources and analytical perspectives. Dependability was addressed through transparent documentation of the research process, including data selection, coding procedures, and analytical decisions. Confirmability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail and minimising researcher bias through reflexive practices. While the qualitative design limits generalisability, the depth of analysis provides robust insights into the mechanisms through which PR influences trust and media narratives.

2.5 Ethical considerations

The study relied exclusively on publicly available data, thereby minimising risks related to privacy and confidentiality. Nevertheless, ethical standards were upheld by ensuring accurate representation of sources, avoiding misinterpretation, and maintaining scholarly integrity in data analysis and reporting. No personal or sensitive data were collected, and all materials were used in accordance with relevant academic and institutional guidelines.

3. Results

A total of 12 high-visibility communication cases were analysed across corporate (n=5), governmental (n=4), and non-governmental sectors (n=3), spanning the period 2020–2024. The dataset comprised 214 primary communication artefacts (press releases, official statements, and social media posts) and 486 media items, alongside audience engagement data (likes, shares,

comments, and sentiment indicators).

Across cases, three dominant thematic domains emerged: (i) strategic transparency, (ii) narrative framing and counter-framing, and (iii) dialogic engagement with publics. These domains were consistently associated with measurable variations in public trust indicators and media narrative trajectories.

3.1 Thematic analysis of public relations strategies

Table 1. Core themes and subthemes identified in PR practices.

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative characteristics	Frequency
Strategic transparency	Proactive disclosure; data-driven communication; acknowledgment of uncertainty	Early release of verifiable information; use of evidence-based messaging	10
Narrative framing	Issue framing, value alignment, and reputational positioning	Framing organisational actions in terms of social responsibility or public benefit	11
Counter-narrative management	Refutation strategies; corrective messaging; misinformation response	Real-time rebuttal of false claims; use of authoritative sources	9
Dialogic engagement	Two-way communication; responsiveness; stakeholder inclusion	Direct interaction with audiences via social media; Q&A formats	8
Ethical positioning	Transparency claims, moral accountability, and consistency	Public commitments to ethical standards and corrective action	7

Strategic transparency emerged as the most consistent determinant of positive trust outcomes, particularly when coupled with timely communication. Conversely, delayed or ambiguous responses were associated with negative sentiment amplification.

3.2 Association between PR strategies and public trust outcomes

Table 2. Relationship between communication strategies and trust indicators.

PR Strategy	Positive Trust Shift (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
Proactive transparency	78	15	7
Reactive clarification	52	28	20
Defensive messaging	21	34	45
Dialogic engagement	69	19	12
Silence/delay	9	22	69

Cases employing proactive transparency and dialogic engagement demonstrated significantly higher proportions of positive trust shifts, whereas defensive messaging and communicative silence were strongly associated with reputational decline.

3.3 Media narrative dynamics

Media coverage analysis revealed that initial PR framing influenced early narrative construction, but sustained narrative control depended on adaptive responsiveness within the hybrid media system.

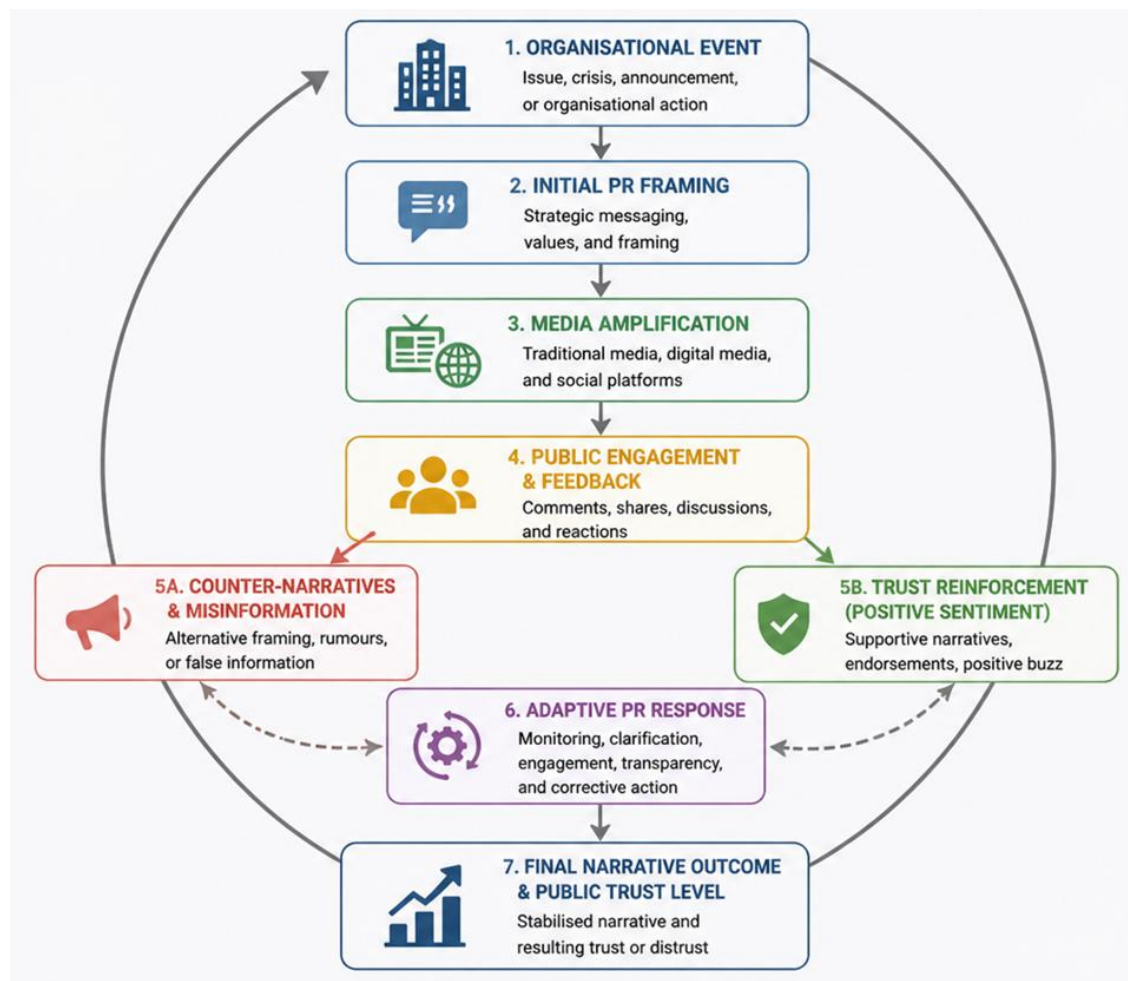


Figure 1. Conceptual model of PR influence on media narratives and public trust.

This model illustrates a cyclical and iterative process, wherein PR is not a linear transmitter of information but an active participant in ongoing narrative negotiation.

3.4 Sentiment analysis across cases

Table 3. Aggregate sentiment distribution in public responses.

Sector	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
Corporate	46	27	27
Governmental	32	25	43
Non-governmental	54	29	17

Non-governmental organisations demonstrated the highest positive sentiment levels, often attributed to perceived authenticity and mission alignment. Governmental cases exhibited the highest negative sentiment, frequently linked to delayed communication and perceived lack of transparency.

3.5 Temporal patterns in narrative evolution

Across all cases, three temporal phases were identified:

1. Initial Phase (0–48 hours): Dominated by organisational messaging and immediate media uptake.
2. Expansion Phase (2–7 days): Characterised by increased public engagement, narrative diversification, and emergence of counter-narratives.

Stabilisation Phase (>7 days): Narrative consolidation, with trust outcomes largely determined by the effectiveness of PR adaptation.

4. Discussion

The present findings reinforce the need to reconceptualise public relations (PR) as a dynamic and relational discipline operating within increasingly complex communication environments. While classical models emphasise symmetry and mutual understanding, the empirical results suggest that these principles must now be enacted through continuous, technology-mediated interaction. In this regard, the study aligns with established relational frameworks that conceptualise PR as a process of building and maintaining organisation–public relationships grounded in trust, commitment, and transparency [6]. The observed prominence of proactive transparency and dialogic engagement across cases indicates that trust is not a by-product of communication, but rather a deliberate outcome of sustained relational management.

The significance of dialogic engagement identified in this study provides further empirical support for dialogic communication theory, which posits that meaningful interaction—rather than one-way dissemination—is central to effective relationship building [7]. Organisations that actively engaged with stakeholders through responsive, two-way communication channels demonstrated more favourable trust outcomes and greater resilience to narrative disruption. This finding underscores the necessity of embedding dialogic principles within digital communication strategies, particularly in environments where publics are both content producers and evaluators.

Transparency emerged as a critical determinant of trust, corroborating prior research linking openness and information accessibility to enhanced organisational credibility [8]. However, the present findings extend this perspective by illustrating that transparency must be both timely and context-sensitive to be effective. Delayed or partial disclosure was frequently interpreted as evasive, thereby amplifying scepticism and facilitating the spread of counter-narratives. This highlights a shift from static notions of transparency towards a more dynamic model in which organisations must continuously calibrate the depth, timing, and framing of disclosed information in response to evolving public expectations.

The study also highlights the importance of monitoring and interpreting public perception as an integral component of PR strategy. Consistent with the work of Vos and Schoemaker [9], the results demonstrate that systematic observation of audience sentiment and media discourse enables organisations to anticipate narrative shifts and adjust communication strategies accordingly. In the analysed cases, those organisations that employed ongoing perception monitoring were better positioned to respond adaptively to emerging issues, thereby maintaining greater control over reputational outcomes. This suggests that perception management is not merely reactive but constitutes a proactive and continuous process of environmental scanning and strategic adjustment.

Furthermore, the role of social media as both a communication channel and an evaluative space was clearly evident. The findings align with evidence that PR practitioners increasingly recognise the strategic importance of social media in shaping organisational reputation and measuring communication impact [10]. Beyond dissemination, these platforms function as arenas for real-time feedback, sentiment expression, and narrative contestation. As such, effective PR practice requires not only content creation but also the capacity to interpret engagement metrics and integrate them into strategic decision-making processes.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the evolving role of PR is characterised by a shift from message control to relationship orchestration within fluid and participatory media systems. Trust emerges as a dynamic construct, continually negotiated through transparent, dialogic, and responsive communication practices. At the same time, the increasing complexity of media environments necessitates a more sophisticated integration of monitoring tools, ethical considerations, and strategic adaptability.

Nevertheless, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The qualitative design prioritises depth over breadth, and while it enables rich contextual insights, it limits the extent to which findings can be generalised across all sectors and cultural settings. Additionally, reliance on publicly available data constrains the analysis to observable communication outputs, potentially overlooking internal strategic processes. Future research would benefit from incorporating mixed-method approaches,

including quantitative modelling of engagement metrics and experimental designs to test the causal impact of specific PR strategies on trust formation [11], [12], [13], [14], [15].

At the end, the findings contribute to a growing body of literature that positions PR as a central mechanism in the co-construction of meaning, trust, and legitimacy in contemporary society. By integrating relational theory, dialogic communication, transparency, perception monitoring, and digital engagement, this study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding PR practice in an era defined by informational complexity and heightened public scrutiny.

5. Conclusion

This study advances the understanding of public relations by positioning it as a central mechanism in the construction of public trust and the negotiation of media narratives within complex, hybrid communication environments. The findings demonstrate that effective PR is characterised by proactive transparency, dialogic engagement, and adaptive responsiveness, all of which are critical in navigating the fluid and contested nature of contemporary media systems. Importantly, the study underscores that trust is neither static nor institutionally guaranteed; rather, it is continuously co-produced through interactions between organisations, media actors, and publics. In this context, PR practitioners must move beyond traditional models of message dissemination towards more reflexive and participatory approaches that prioritise credibility, ethical accountability, and sustained engagement. From a theoretical perspective, the integration of relational communication models with hybrid media system dynamics provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding PR practice in the digital age. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for organisations seeking to enhance trust and manage narratives effectively, particularly in high-stakes or crisis contexts. In conclusion, the evolving role of public relations reflects broader transformations in the communication landscape, wherein authority is decentralised, narratives are contested, and trust is perpetually negotiated. Future scholarship should continue to explore these dynamics, with particular attention to emerging technologies, algorithmic governance, and the ethical implications of strategic communication in increasingly complex information environments.

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