Measurement, evaluation + learning (MEL): New approaches for insights, outcomes, and impact

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Abstract

This chapter discusses new approaches that can overcome the "stasis" and "deadlock" observed in measurement and evaluation (M&E) of public relations, and open the door to an evidence-based, value-adding role at a strategic level. Based on recent studies and new research, this chapter supports and advances 'learning about' M&E by offering translational and practical tools, including two simple tests and a formula to elevate practice from reporting basic metrics that record *outputs* to identifying outcomes and impact. Furthermore, this analysis advocates and advances 'learning from' M&E to the extent of reconceptualizing the practice as *measurement*, *evaluation* and *learning* (MEL) that contribute to creation of a learning organization and lead to transformational benefits at a functional, organizational, stakeholder, and societal level.

Keywords: Measurement, evaluation, learning, outputs, outcomes, impact

"Stasis" and "deadlock"—The need for new approaches

To understand the importance of new approaches in measurement and evaluation of public relations, commonly abbreviated to M&E, it is necessary to recognize that the field has been described as in a state of "stasis" (Gregory & Watson, 2008) and "deadlock" (Macnamara, 2015) despite being a major topic of discussion for more than 50 years. After referring to the importance of research generally in the first edition of *Effective Public Relations* (Cutlip & Center, 1952), Cutlip and Center added evaluation as the fourth step in the 'PR process' after "fact-finding, planning and communicating" in their second edition in 1958 (Hallahan, 1993, p. 198). In fact, evaluation has been identified as important for almost a century since Edward Bernays described public relations as an applied social science that can and should be "precisely evaluated" (Watson, 2012, p. 391).

However, numerous studies have pointed to a failure to conduct valid, rigorous M&E of public relations activities. For example, Michaelson and Stacks (2011) reported that "public relations practitioners have consistently failed to achieve consensus on what the basic evaluative measures are or how to conduct the underlying research for evaluating and measuring public relations performance" (p. 1). The 2012 *European Communication Monitor* reported that 75 per cent of European practitioners identified inability "to prove the impact of communication activities on organizational goals" as a "major barrier to further professionalization and growth" (Zerfass, et al., 2012, p. 36). In the US, Wright and Hinson (2012) similarly found that practitioners struggled to evaluate their work and often did not—a finding confirmed in 2016 by Cacciatore et al. (2016).

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Even more recently, a 2020 global PR industry study reported that, on average, 46 per cent of practitioners continue to use so-called advertising value equivalents (AVEs)—long regarded as invalid and condemned by the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC, 2020a).

A special issue of the *Journal of Communication Management* in 2019 that emerged from a panel discussion at the International Communication Association's (ICA) 2018 Annual Conference identified a number of other obstacles to M&E including a need for maturity gained through a "holistic approach, investment, alignment and culture" (Gilkerson et al., 2019), agility (van Ruler, 2019), and overcoming "functional stupidity" caused by practitioners over-promising and then avoiding M&E even while acknowledging its importance (Nothhaft & Stensson, 2019).

Such studies provide the context and rationale for continuing research to find ways to embed measurement and evaluation into public relations practice, widely regarded as essential in an age of accountability and governance.

The search for the 'Holy Grail' of public relations

The search for what researcher John Pavlik (1987) and, more recently, Jacqui L'Etang (2008) referred to as the Holy Grail of public relations has produced many explanations for the lack of valid, rigorous M&E and identified a number of alleged barriers.

Lack of budget and/or time are frequently cited by practitioners (Hon, 1998; Macnamara, 2015). However, these claims are rejected by researchers who point out that M&E can be conducted at low cost, or even no cost in some circumstances, and with a minimal time investment (Lindenmann, 2001). This argument is supported by the AMEC awards which include a category for 'Best evaluation on a small budget' with a limit of US$10,000 and in which as number of small budget M&E projects have won awards in open categories (AMEC, 2020b).

Stasis and a deadlock in M&E cannot be attributed to a lack of theory, frameworks, or models to follow. As summarized in Watson (2012), Likely and Watson (2013), Watson and Noble (2014), Macnamara (2018), and others, there is a plethora of frameworks, models and guides for M&E of public relations activities. Many of these are readily available to practitioners, such as the AMEC Evaluation Framework, which is a free online tool (AMEC, 2016). Furthermore, there is a substantial body of theory related to M&E in public administration, international development, education, and management literature. This includes explication of *theory of change* (Anderson, 2005; Clark & Taplin, 2012); program evaluation theory (Bickman, 1987; Rossi et al., 2004; Weiss, 1972; Wholey, 1983, 1987; Wholey et al., 2010); and tools such as program logic models (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Kellogg Foundation, 2004; Knowlton & Phillips, 2013). As shown in the preceding references, evaluation theory has been extensively developed over several decades.

A number of researchers have argued that a lack of knowledge of evaluation theory and research methodology is the reason for stasis and the use of invalid methods (e.g., Cutler, 2004; Baskin et al., 2010, p. 111). Eminent public relations scholar, Jim Grunig, supported this view in a 2014 'thought leaders' interview saying: "The one variable that consistently explains why public relations people do what they do is their level of knowledge" (Grunig, 2014, para. 4).

Recent research affirms the importance of knowledge and identifies four key knowledge-related contributors to lack of progress in this important phase of public relations work. New studies go a step further to show that it is not only the acquisition of knowledge that is required, but *research translation* is necessary to embed knowledge in practice. In the medical field, this is referred to as ‘bench to bedside’, alluding to the transition of laboratory research findings to applied patient care (Drolet & Lorenzi, 2011). Furthermore, findings of recent research identify strategies for overcoming persistent obstacles to successfully apply M&E in public relations.

Four key challenges to overcome

From review of the extensive literature on public relations M&E and recent participatory action research (PAR) working with public relations and communication practitioners, at least four key challenges can be identified, which in turn inform strategies for overcoming stasis and applying M&E.

Monodisciplinarity

The first factor to be addressed in order to conduct valid, rigorous M&E of public relations is transdisciplinary engagement with fields that have developed and applied a body of evaluation knowledge. As noted previously, evaluation is well-advanced in international development, public administration, the education sector, and in some areas of management such as business performance management (BPM). As identified in analysis of public relations M&E frameworks and models (Macnamara & Likely, 2017), public relations has largely ignored relevant theories such as *theory of change* and the large body of program evaluation theory developed by the likes of Rossi et al. (2004); Weiss (1972), and Wholey (1983, 1987), as well as practical tools used in other disciplines such as program logic models (Kellogg Foundation, 2004; Knowlton & Phillips, 2013).

Public relations practice and much public relations M&E scholarship have ‘gone it alone’, inventing new concepts, models, and terms. For instance, ignoring the stages of widely-used program logic models—commonly listed as *inputs*, *activities*, *outputs*, *outcomes* (short and long term), and *impact*—the much-cited Cutlip and Center (1985) model listed the stages of the ‘PR process’ as *planning*, *implementation*, and *impact*. The ‘PR Effectiveness Yardstick’ developed by Lindenmann (1993) also proposed three stages, but referred to these as outputs, *outgrowths* and outcomes. UK Institute of Public Relations[1] evaluation consultant, Michael Fairchild, created what he called his “three measures”, which he identified as output, *outtake* and outcome (1997, p. 24), and the term *out-takes* has been widely used since including in the AMEC Evaluation Framework (AMEC, 2016). Watson and Noble (2007) proposed five stages in what they claimed was a “unified model”, but called these input, output, impact, *effect*, and *result* (p. 93). Few of the M&E frameworks and models used in public relations align to program evaluation theory or frameworks used in other disciplines.

As a result of lack of engagement with the body of evaluation knowledge, implementation of public relations M&E is often attempted as an ‘add on’ after activities have been commenced, or even after they have been completed (*ex-post*), ignoring program evaluation theory that identifies three stages as “formative” (*ex-ante*), “process”, and “summative” (Rice & Atkin, 2013, p. 13). Formative evaluation provides essential baseline data for later comparison, as well as valuable insights into audience attitudes, interests, concerns, and channel preferences that inform strategy.

Lack of standards

The 'siloed' approach to M&E in public relations has led to the second key contributor to a lack of evaluation, *pseudo-evaluation* (Dozier, 1985; Hon, 1998), and frequent use of *vanity metrics* (Bartholomew, 2016, p. 97)—a lack of standards. Despite several industry initiatives over the past two decades, a study by Buhmann et al. (2019) showed that the public relations sector has not followed any of the pathways to establishing *de jure* or *de facto* standards. Standards specialists such as Slager et al. (2012) identify three dimensions of establishing standards, namely (1) design, (2) legitimation and (3) monitoring. These need to be supported by what Slager et al. call "standardization work", including "calculative framing", "engaging", and "valorizing" (p. 764). *Calculative framing* refers to definitions and the adoption of common terminology, usually based on analogical approaches or mimicking other successful examples, which makes standards "more understandable" and adds to their credibility (Slager et al., 2012, p. 776). *Engaging* refers to collaborating with third party experts, while *valorizing* involves educating potential adopters, promotion of standards, and symbolic initiatives such as awarding certificates or accreditation (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; Slager et al., 2012). Buhmann et al. (2019) noted that none of these three dimensions has been adequately applied in the development of public relations M&E to date, with widely varying terminology as noted previously, little engagement with academic evaluation experts or social and market research companies, and a lack of education and promotion beyond the limited efforts of AMEC.

Media myopia—the outputs obsession

A third factor that has further narrowed the lens through which public relations M&E is viewed is a dominant focus on media—press, radio, TV, and most recently social media. Despite broad and even 'grand' theories of public relations that incorporate reputation management, stakeholder relations, issue and crisis management, public affairs, employee relations, and more (Broom, 2009; L'Etang, 2013, p. 800), and claims to be providers of "counsel" to management (Bernays, 1923), studies show that a large part of the field is focussed on media relations and publicity. Wright and Hinson (2012) reported that most public relations practitioners measure what is said about their employers and clients in media, but only a quarter evaluate the outcomes or impact of communication. More recently, a survey of more than 2,000 communication professionals across 41 European countries, reported that more than 80 per cent rely on counting the volume of publicity as their main method of evaluation (Zerfass et al., 2015, p. 72). A media-centric approach is also evident among M&E service providers for public relations, which are primarily media monitoring and media analysis firms. As noted by Buhmann et al. (2019), the membership of AMEC bears witness to the media myopia that plagues public relations, being almost totally made up of companies focussed on media analytics and metrics.

Because media are channels distributing information to audiences, their contents are *outputs* in program theory terms. What is in media does not necessarily correlate with what is in the minds, or reflected in the behaviour, of target audiences. In contrast with early assumptions of strong and direct media effects under *transmissional* notions of communication, media research has shown that media effects are contextual and contingent, and sometimes minimal or non-existent (Bryant & Oliver, 2009; Oliver et al., 2020). Media metrics, such as volume of publicity; share of voice; message placement; volume of clicks to a web page or video; social media follows; and even so-called media 'sentiment' are somewhat useful indicators of progress towards influencing target audiences, but they only indicate a potential for influence. Selective attention, cognitive dissonance, reactance, interpretation and misinterpretation such as confirmation bias, and other aspects of human agency affect awareness, attitudes, and behaviour.

Media centricity in public relations not only causes would-be evaluators to stop half way in terms of program logic; in many cases it stifles effectiveness by limiting objectives to process rather than results. For example, some practitioners in the *technician* rather than strategic management mould (Dozier, 1992) see media publicity and a large volume of social media followers and website clicks as objectives of public relations. In contrast, communication studies show that effectiveness in communication is identified in terms of audience *awareness*, *attitudes* aligned to a communicator's objectives and, in many cases, desired *behaviour* change. These are referred to as 'outcomes' and 'impact' in evaluation frameworks and models.

'Substitution error'
A lack of knowledge of relevant theory and best practice in other fields, a lack of standards, and particularly the focus on media metrics, have created a fourth stumbling block that has been identified since the mid-1980s, but which continues to impede public relations today. Recent research shows that overcoming what is referred to as 'substitution error' opens the door to demonstrating the effectiveness and value of public relations.

In their widely-used textbook, *Effective Public Relations*, Cutlip and colleagues noted repeatedly in editions from 1985 to the late-2000s that "the common error in program evaluation is substituting measures from one level for those at another level" (Cutlip & Center, 1985, p. 295; Broom, 2009, p. 358). In particular, emeritus professor of public relations, Jim Grunig, described substitution error as using "a metric gathered at one level of analysis to show an outcome at a higher level of analysis" (2008, p. 89). Grunig should have said 'claim' rather than 'show' an outcome, because lower level metrics such as evidence of outputs do not show an outcome or impact for the reasons stated previously.

A common example of substitution error is reporting media impressions and the 'sentiment' of traditional or social media content as evidence of an outcome, or even impact. In fact, these metrics refer to the potential audience reach and the tone of media coverage – namely, what is put out in media channels (i.e., outputs), not response, awareness, attitudes, or behaviour of the target audience as a result of communication (outcomes and impact).

A study conducted in 2020 and 2021, reported in the following, refuted the generalized claim that public relations practitioners do not do measurement and evaluation, showing that many collect and present data, but confirmed that substitution error results in a lack of validity. To counter substitution error, the study developed a formula for identifying outcomes and impact and extended M&E to provide insights that lead to continuous improvement and strategic value, as reported in the following.

New findings to break through the evaluation ceiling

In early 2020, a team of evaluation specialists were engaged by the World Health Organization (WHO) to help its Department of Communications and regional and country communication staff optimize the effectiveness of WHO communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. To support the WHO's objectives of creating awareness of, support for, and adoption of key health practices such as hand washing, physical distancing, mask wearing, and vaccination, existing evaluation was reviewed and enhancements were introduced based on best practice literature and empirical evidence in relation to WHO communication activities. These included media publicity; social media postings content; website; publications; and communication campaigns such as its influencer strategy using celebrities.

WHO's communication during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of effectiveness in achieving outcomes and impact. Simply distributing information and messages (outputs) was not enough. Without effectiveness in creating awareness and influencing attitudes and behaviour, the virus would cause ever-spreading illness and increasing fatalities. Influencing government policies and public behaviour was a matter of life or death for many people in this instance.

Participatory action research was used as the most appropriate primary research methodology for responding to the WHO's brief because, in line with the focus of action research, it required examination of WHO communication during the processes of planning and implementation with the aim of improving practice (Reason & Bradbury, 2007). Participation by those involved in the actions was essential because WHO communication staff were required to carry out the actions being studied. Therefore, *learning* for internal capability development was identified as a key focus of the project. WHO communication staff from more than 40 countries were involved in the 18 months of research.

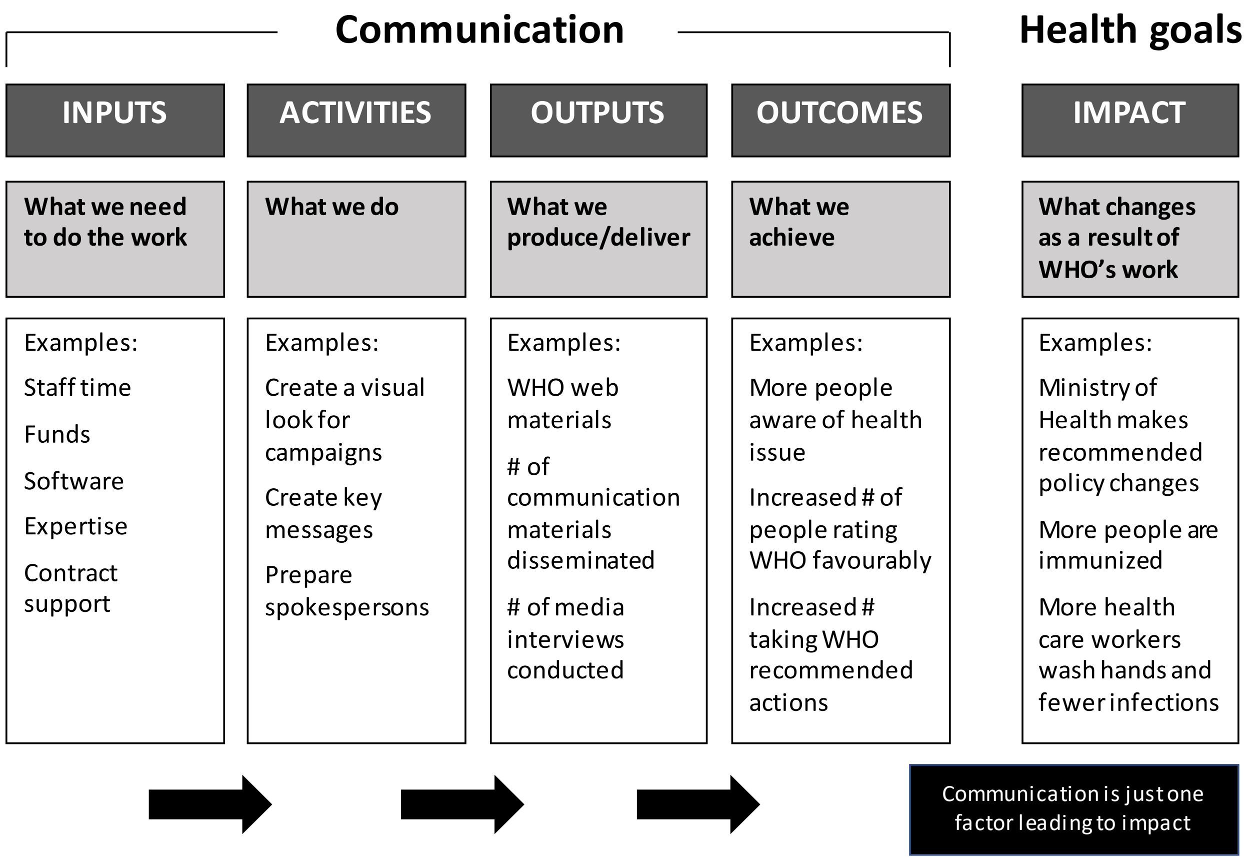
PAR proceeded based on interviews and regular discussion groups with WHO communication staff and analysis of key documents such as the WHO Strategic Communications Framework (World Health Organization, 2017) and a range of existing M&E reports. Analysis included critical reflection that was stimulated and synthesized through the circulation of internal feedback forms and online workshops to discuss M&E methods and data collected.

Review of the WHO's existing M&E found that a substantial amount of data was collected in relation to communication, but the primary focus was on traditional and social media metrics. Weekly reports were contracted from two media monitoring and analysis firms, Media Measurement (https://www.mediameasurement.com) and Polecat (https://www.polecat.com), and website statistics were collected using Google Analytics.

The WHO "Logic Model / Frame" for communication published in its evaluation guidelines presents a five-stage program logic model aligned to program evaluation theory with a focus on outcomes and ultimately achieving health goals (see Figure 1).

However, M&E of WHO communication early in the pandemic was based almost solely on media metrics that were presented as 'results' and even as alleged impact. One of the media analysis firms used raw counts of media mentions over time as an alleged measure of impact (Media Measurement, 2020), while the other used a proprietary algorithm to calculate "impact" on reputation based on "audience reach", "relevance", and "credibility of the source" (Polecat, 2020, p. 5). These are exemplars of misnaming and substitution error that commonly occurs in public relations M&E.

Figure 1. The WHO Logic Model / Frame for communication (World Health Organization, 2020).



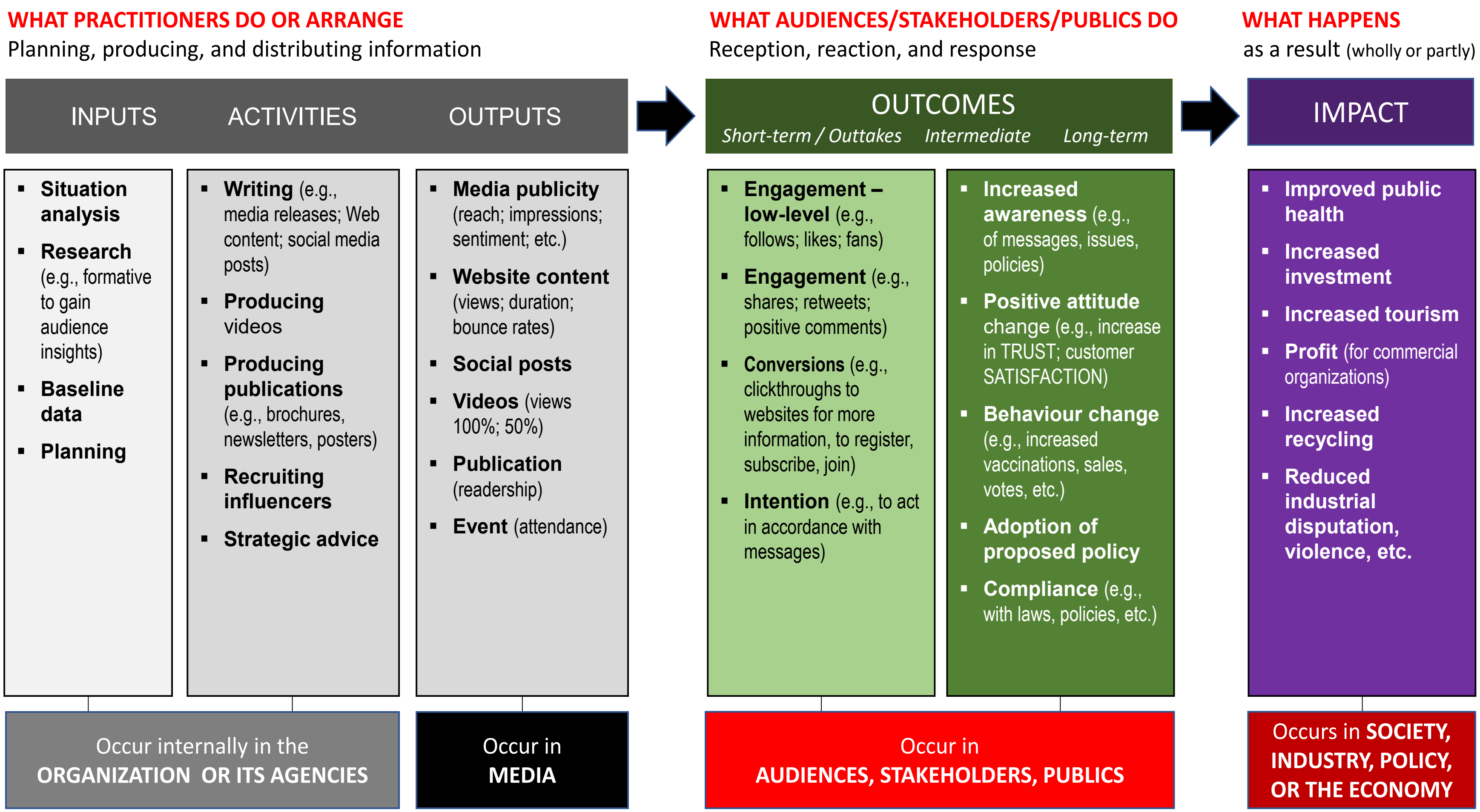
To address substitution error and expand M&E of WHO communication with a view to achieving and showing outcomes and impact, the evaluation specialists leading the study implemented 'learning about' measurement and evaluation through a series of capability development workshops for WHO communication staff and produced a manual informed by evaluation literature and findings of the participatory action research (Macnamara & Taylor, 2021). As part of this, a visual illustration was used to demonstrate the progression from and difference between inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact, particularly focussed on the step up from outputs to outcomes and impact—the stages where substitution error commonly occurs. The illustration is referred to as a "dissected" program logic model (see Figure 2). Construction of the model and a formula for identifying inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes of public relations are guided by two simple tests.

The Doer Test

The first test is referred to in plain language as the *Doer Test*. As the name suggests, this involves identifying the doer of the action or factor measured. The Doer Test reveals that:

1. Inputs, activities and outputs are what practitioners do and create on behalf of their organizations as would-be communicators—what they produce and 'put out';
2. Outcomes are what target audiences do as a result of communication activities and outputs. (Macnamara, 2020).
3. Impact is what organizations, communities, industry, the economy, or society do wholly or partly because of the communication.

Figure 2. Dissected program logic model showing application of the 'doer' and the 'site' test for sample PR inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact (Macnamara & Taylor, 2021, p. 22).



The Site Test

A second related test that confirms whether a metric or indicator relates to outputs, outcomes, or impact is the *Site Test*. The Site Test identifies where the reported phenomenon occurs. If it occurs in media (in the broad sense of the term denoting any channel that mediates information), it is an output.

To be an outcome, it must occur in the target audience as a reaction or response, which can be *cognitive* (awareness and thinking); *affective* (emotional connection); *conative* (forming an intention); or *behavioural*.

Impact occurs in an organization beyond the communication function, and/or in a community, industry, economy, or society (see Figure 2).

As indicated in the WHO logic model / frame (Figure 1), impact is often the result of multiple influencers and separated from communication activities, outputs, and outcomes by a time delay. Thus, proving impact is more challenging and long-term, although there are also tests for establishing *causality* (Macnamara, 2018, p. 69). However, as illustrated in the WHO Logic Model / Frame, communication should at least include demonstration of outcomes. The 'dissected' program logic model shown in Figure 2 illustrates that these should include short-term outcomes and, ideally, medium to long-term outcomes that align to desired impact.

Reach, impressions, message placement, and sentiment (also referred to as tone or positivity) are measures of outputs because they relate to information and message that have been 'put out'. They report the potential size of the audience reached; the number of times messages were potentially exposed to the target audience; and the extent to which media content is favourable, or unfavourable, towards an organization and its operations. But traditional and social media metrics (quantitative) and indicators (qualitative as well as quantitative) do not tell us what audiences actually saw or heard, or what they thought and did as a result.

Similarly, web statistics such as page visits, video views, and clickthroughs only provide information on how many people saw the content. Many may have ignored, disbelieved, forgotten about it soon after, or even rejected the information.

In social media, follows, likes, shares, and comments are audience responses—and, therefore *prima facie* outcomes. However, follows represent a very low level of engagement, noting that many people follow individuals and organizations simply to gain reciprocal followers, and some follow others as part of critical monitoring. Likes are also a quite low level of engagement based on simply clicking an icon. Shares and positive comments in social media are more significant examples of audience reaction and response, albeit at a short-term outcomes stage. Higher levels of attitude and behaviour change are commonly required to achieve organization objectives.

Identification of increased awareness, positive attitude change, and behaviour change (outcomes) typically requires the conduct of periodic social science research such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, ethnography (systematic observation) and sometimes experiments, along with analysis of secondary data from internal databases (e.g., employee and customer retention) and external databases such as public health records, share market reports, and public policy. The participatory action research to improve WHO M&E resulted in the introduction of interviews with key stakeholders; monitoring of public policy and health regulations to identify uptake of WHO recommendations and guidelines; and public surveys to identify trust in the WHO.

It is significant to point out that the WHO's budget for communication is limited because its funding is primarily devoted to international health programs. Cost-efficient M&E to identify outcomes was implemented by assigning internal policy and technical staff to monitor health policy and health authority initiatives, and communication staff conducted stakeholder interviews using a questionnaire developed by the researchers leading the project. Public surveys were scheduled for selective sample markets on an annual basis to gain indicative response data and opportunities were sought for 'piggybacking' questions about WHO in omnibus surveys, as well as using low-cost e-surveys. This reinforces Lindenmann's (2001) argument that "research doesn't have to put you in the poorhouse" (p. 1).

This cost-efficient approach highlights the importance of learning to acquire M&E knowledge internally. While service providers can be contracted to access specialized skills, internal understanding is essential to see past promoters of proprietary systems based on 'black box' algorithms; to undertake some evaluation in-house for timing or budget reasons; and to write research briefs when necessary. The UK Government Communication Service (GCS) is an exemplar of investment in capability development of its 4,000-plus communication staff. For example, in 2020 the GCS delivered more than 100 GCS Academy short courses to more than 3,000 communication staff (Government Communication Service, 2021). For those without employer-provided training, AMEC conducts online courses for practitioners, including an International Certificate in Measurement and Evaluation (AMEC College, 2020).

Expanding M&E to MEL

As well learning about M&E, the sharing of knowledge and critical reflection through participatory action research with the WHO communication team resulted in an expansion of M&E to *measurement, evaluation and learning* (MEL) as an overall approach with a focus on 'learning from' M&E. As documented in *The MEL Manual* (Macnamara & Taylor, 2021), this was implemented at all stages of evaluation—formative, process, and summative—and provided transformational benefits at a functional and organizational level.

By introducing formative evaluation as part of the inputs stage of campaigns and projects using methods such as stakeholder interviews, *ex-ante* audience surveys, landscape analysis based on desk research, and pre-testing, the WHO communication team obtained valuable data and insights including:

- *Baseline data* such as existing awareness levels, attitudes, perceptions, and compliance with organization objectives, without which evidence-based summative evaluation is impossible;
- Knowledge of audience *channel preferences*, which identified the most effective and efficient ways to reach target audiences. With accurate knowledge of the audience's most used and trusted information channels, wastage can be avoided and resources can be focussed;
- Understanding of *audience perceptions, attitudes, interests, needs, and concerns*. This not only informed the selection of information to provide and the phrasing of messages, but also contributed to organizational strategy. Senior management was interested in knowing what key audiences expected of the organization and what their main needs and concerns were.

A focus on learning during process evaluation, such as media monitoring and analysis of website statistics, shifted attention from progress reporting to identifying opportunities to fine-tune and adjust strategy and tactics. For example, web pages and videos that attracted high numbers of views with substantial duration were given more prominence in promotion, and those with low viewer numbers and high bounce rates were removed or revised.

Summative evaluation was transformed from weighty reports of media coverage, often with verbatim quotes or clippings attached, and pages of tables and charts titled in PR vernacular such as ‘Opportunities to See’ and ‘Sentiment’, to *dashboards* summarizing key findings and, most importantly, a page or two of strategic insights and recommendations based on what had been learned from analysis. Deep analysis to gain strategic insights and form recommendations requires considerable knowledge of research and analysis techniques, as well as communication. Hence, internal ‘learning about’ and external ‘learning from’ are interdependent in a MEL cycle.

Ultimately, a MEL approach can contribute to an organization becoming a *learning organization* (Örtenblad, 2018), as well as establish a culture of continuous improvement at a public relations functional level. By contributing learning, particularly evidence-based insights and recommendations that inform organizational strategy, public relations can realize its long-held aim to be part of the ‘dominant coalition’ (Berger, 2005; Broom, 2009), or at least have the ear of senior management and play a strategic role in organizations.

Conclusions

While the WHO participatory action research project was located in one organization, the large number of offices and staff involved worldwide across multiple cultures and social and media systems, suggest that the findings are likely to be applicable in other organizations. This study, like some others, showed that evaluation has moved on since Jim Grunig’s *cri de coeur* (cry from the heart) in which he famously lamented:

> Lately, I have begun to feel more and more like the fundamentalist minister railing against sin; the difference being that I have railed *for* evaluation in public relations practice. Just as everyone is against sin, so most public relations people I talk to are for evaluation. People keep on sinning, however, and PR people continue not to do evaluation research. (Grunig, 1983, p. 28)

Recent research shows that some, even considerable, M&E is done by many practitioners. But much of the commitment is focussed on measuring and evaluating the wrong things. As Peter Drucker admonished, it is important to do the right thing, not just do things right. The right thing in terms of showing effectiveness in public relations is providing evidence of outcomes and impact.

This means that public relations practitioners need to look beyond media, which are a half-way point in public communication. Media metrics and indicators are, at best, a proxy for outcomes. Also, focus on content, which has become a popular contemporary trend in marketing and public relations, narrows focus to outputs. Evaluation of effectiveness requires a shift from ‘making things’ to ‘making things happen’.

The large body of theory in relation to measurement and evaluation, both in public relations and neighbouring disciplines, shows that there is no lack of theory. The continuing stasis and frequent substitution error indicate that there is a need for *research translation* in relation to evaluation of public relations and communication to guide the application of theory in practice. Research translation is seen as important and extensively conducted in medical fields, science, and education to ensure that specialized knowledge is understood and appropriately applied, but is relatively rare in public relations and communication. This call to researchers closely aligns with the advocacy of eminent communication studies scholar, Robert Craig (2018), who argues that *practical theory* is important in fields such as communication in addition to empirical social science (pp. 289–290). Craig refers to practical theory not “in the colloquial sense of technical or occupational training" but in terms of "communicative praxis … to improve communication and disseminate better communication practices" (Craig, 2018, pp. 289–290). The 'dissected' program logic model and the Doer Test and Site Test are contributions to research translation and practical theory that can aid understanding and foster praxis in applied public relations.

Underpinning all development and praxis is the need for learning. This analysis supports the focus on practitioner knowledge by other authors including Grunig (2008, 2014) and Baskin et al. (2010). But it goes further than supporting *learning about* M&E, aided by research translation and practical theory, to advocate continuous *learning from* M&E to the extent that learning is a third essential element in a tripartite concept of measurement, evaluation and learning (MEL). In program logic terms, measurement and evaluation are processes, from which learning is an important outcome that, in turn, can inform strategies that lead to impact. Thus, MEL can provide transformational benefits internally within the function of public relations and externally in terms of organization management, communities, the economy, and society.

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