Major Concepts and Elements

The first task of public relations communications is to get attention of target publics. Second is to stimulate interest in message content. Third is to build a desire to act on the message. And fourth is to direct the action of those who behave consistent with the messages.

Communication is a reciprocal process of exchanging signals to inform, instruct, or persuade, based on shared meanings and conditioned by the communicators’ relationship and the social context.

Elements of the communication model include the sender, the message, the medium or channel, the receivers, context of the relationship, and the social environment.

Public relations communication effects include:

- Creating perceptions of the world around us—forming “pictures in our heads” about events, things, people and places we could not experience directly ourselves.
- Setting the agenda—determining salience (importance) of issues and of positions taken by others in the news.
- Diffusing information and innovations—increasing the information available for subsequent interpersonal communication.
- Defining social support—defining socially accepted expression and behavior by providing “feedback” on our social environments.

Public opinion is a dynamic process of developing consensus (“thinking together”) that can be described at a single point in time using direction (evaluation), intensity (strength), stability (duration), informational support (knowledge held), and social support (perception of others’ views).

The concept of a “general public” holds little, if any, value in public relations. Rather, effective programs communicate with and build relationships with specifically defined “target publics.”

Grunig’s situational theory of publics identifies three factors for defining publics:
1) problem recognitions—the extent to which people are aware that there is a problem,
2) constraint recognition—the extent to which people see themselves limited by external factors versus seeing that they can do something about the problem situation, and
3) level of involvement—the extent to which people see themselves being involved in or affected by the situation.

An attitude is a cross–situational predisposition or preference with respect to an object. An opinion is the judgment expressed about an object in a particular situation or given a specific set of circumstances.

Individual orientations to issues and objects in their environments include both salience—their feelings derived from a lifetime of experience (cross-situational value)—and pertinence—the relative value of the issue or object based on comparisons with other issues or objects in the situation (situational value).

The coorientational model includes four intrapersonal and interpersonal elements: Agreement represents the extent to which two or more persons share similar evaluations of an issue of mutual interest. Understanding represents the extent to which two or more persons share similar definitions of an issue of mutual interest. Accuracy represents the extent to which one’s estimate of another person’s views matches the other person’s actual views. Congruency, the one intrapersonal construct, describes the extent to which one’s views match your estimate of another’s views on the same issue.

Monolithic consensus represents that state of public opinion in which high levels of actual agreement are accurately perceived by a majority of those involved. Dissensus represents that state of public opinion in which high levels of actual disagreement are accurately perceived by a majority of those involved. False consensus exists when there is actual agreement but a majority of those involved think they agree. Pluralistic ignorance represents the state of public opinion in which the majority perceive little agreement, but in fact there is widespread agreement.

Multiple Choice Questions
1. Communication is the reciprocal process of exchanging messages designed to inform, instruct, or __________.

Which of the following completes the statement?

A. persuade  
B. stimulate  
C. divert attention  
D. misdirect the audience  
E. create an image

2. Early notions of mass communication viewed mass society as both passive recipients of media messages and vulnerable to being manipulated. Which best describes current thinking?

A. Audiences are more vulnerable and passive than ever before.  
B. Television viewing in particular creates increased activity in the right hemisphere of viewers’ brains.  
C. Technology has led to increasingly passive recipients at the ends of message transmission systems.  
D. Active receivers are not uniformly affected by mass communication messages.  
E. All of the above.

3. Lippmann’s model of the “triangular relationship” depicted the role of mass media in shaping public opinion. Which best describes the effect of mass communication in Lippmann’s model?

A. Developing an accurate assessment of the “scene of the action”  
B. Developing a shared understanding of the “scene of the action”  
C. Developing a “trustworthy picture” of the world beyond our direct experience  
D. Developing increasingly passive recipients of media messages  
E. Developing increased activity in the right hemisphere of our brains

4. Walter Lippmann described the “triangular relationship” to depict the role of mass media in forming the “pictures in our heads.” Which one of the following best summarizes his view of mass media impact?

A. Children are sitting targets for the big three sources of influence—television, tools, and temptation.  
B. As a high involvement media, television produces a “see–learn–feel–do” sequence.  
C. Most of us experience events, things, people, and places directly, thereby minimizing the effects of mass media.  
D. Responses based on perceptions of the scene of the action have little consequence because they are just that, perceptions.  
E. Responses based on our perceptions of the scene of the action have impact on the original scene of the action.

5. Which of the following theories suggests that mass media affect what we think about—raising the salience of issues and the positions taken by people in the news?

A. Situational publics  
B. Hypodermic needle  
C. Opinion formation  
D. Agenda setting  
E. Diffusion theory

6. Evidence showing the extent to which people think others share their opinions indicates which one of the following?

A. Persuasion effect  
B. Direction of public opinion  
C. Intensity of public opinion  
D. Stability of public opinion  
E. Perceptions of the state of consensus

7. The “sociocultural model” of communication effects indicates which one of the following?

A. Mass media messages may provide the appearance of consensus  
B. Cultural differences insulate people from mass media attempts to build consensus  
C. Mass media try to play down cultural differences in order to build consensus  
D. Public opinion is like atmospheric pressure, always there but you don’t see it  
E. People are reluctant to express their views if they are reported in the media

8. Individuals assign value to objects in their environment based on their previous history with the objects and their assessment of the objects in the current context. Which of the following describes these two sources of value?
9. Which one of the following is the cross-situational predisposition or preference?

A. Spiral of silence
B. Attitude
C. Cognition
D. Opinion
E. Pertinence

10. In the coorientational model, if Person A holds a positive evaluation of Object “X” and Person B feels the same about “X,” this is an example of which one of the following?

A. High agreement
B. High accuracy
C. High congruency
D. Low accuracy but high agreement
E. High accuracy but low congruency

11. In the coorientational model, if Person A holds a positive evaluation of Object “X” and thinks that Person B feels the same about “X,” this is an example of which one of the following?

A. High agreement
B. High accuracy
C. High congruency
D. Low accuracy but high agreement
E. High accuracy but low congruency

12. If someone told you that public opinion on an issue could be described as “dissensus” (Scheff’s term), which one of the following (in coorientational terms) best fits that situation?

A. High accuracy, high congruency, and high agreement
B. Low agreement, low accuracy, and low congruency
C. High congruency, low accuracy, and low agreement
D. High congruency, low accuracy, and low agreement
E. Low agreement, low congruency, and high accuracy

13. Which one of the following represents the state of public opinion in which a majority perceives little agreement, but in fact there is widespread agreement?

A. Interpersonal congruency
B. Pluralistic ignorance
C. Complete consensus
D. Coorientational consensus
E. False consensus

14. Use of repeated measures of coorientational states over time can help track changes in which of the following?

A. Perceptions of agreement
B. Actual agreement
C. Accuracy
D. Monolithic consensus
E. All of the above

Case Study Scenario Questions

Assume that you have been retained by the airport authority to develop a public relations program to prepare a press packet announcing that the city airport will be relocated. Your client thinks there is agreement between the airport authority board and the majority of registered voters that “a new airport should be relocated to the recently closed military base.” You decide to use the coorientational model to analyze the relationships between your client and registered voters in your community on the issue.

Using “airport relocation” as the object of coorientation (the “X” in the model), you begin researching the state of public opinion and the nature of coorientational relationships your client has with registered voters on this issue. You learn from surveys that, contrary to what your client thinks, a vast majority of registered voters feel the airport should be expanded and should remain where it is. In addition, a majority say that the airport authority has no plan to move the airport.

1. Which coorientational description best defines this relationship?
A. High agreement, high congruency, and high accuracy  
B. High agreement, low congruency, and low accuracy  
C. Low agreement, high congruency, and low accuracy  
D. Low agreement, low congruency, and high accuracy  
E. Low agreement, low congruency, and low accuracy

2. Which of Scheff’s states of coorientational consensus best describes the relationship between your client and the majority of the registered voters interviewed?
   A. Monolithic consensus  
   B. False consensus  
   C. Pluralistic ignorance  
   D. Dissensus  
   E. Salience

3. What should your public relations firm recommend to the board members of the airport authority?
   A. Your firm should develop the most persuasive press packet possible. The client wants to make the announcement and your job is to facilitate the client’s plan.  
   B. Your firm should tell the client that what is really needed is a campaign to convince registered voters that the airport needs to be relocated.  
   C. Your firm should report the survey results showing that a majority of registered voters do not support the relocation.  
   D. Your firm should come up with a message strategy that features the advantages of the relocation and argues that the military base is too good a deal to pass up.  
   E. Your firm should recommend that the client find a political advertising agency, because this situation calls for an advertising campaign.

**Essay Exam Questions**

1. Explain how the spiral of silence works to influence public opinion.