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The State of the Art in PR Evaluation
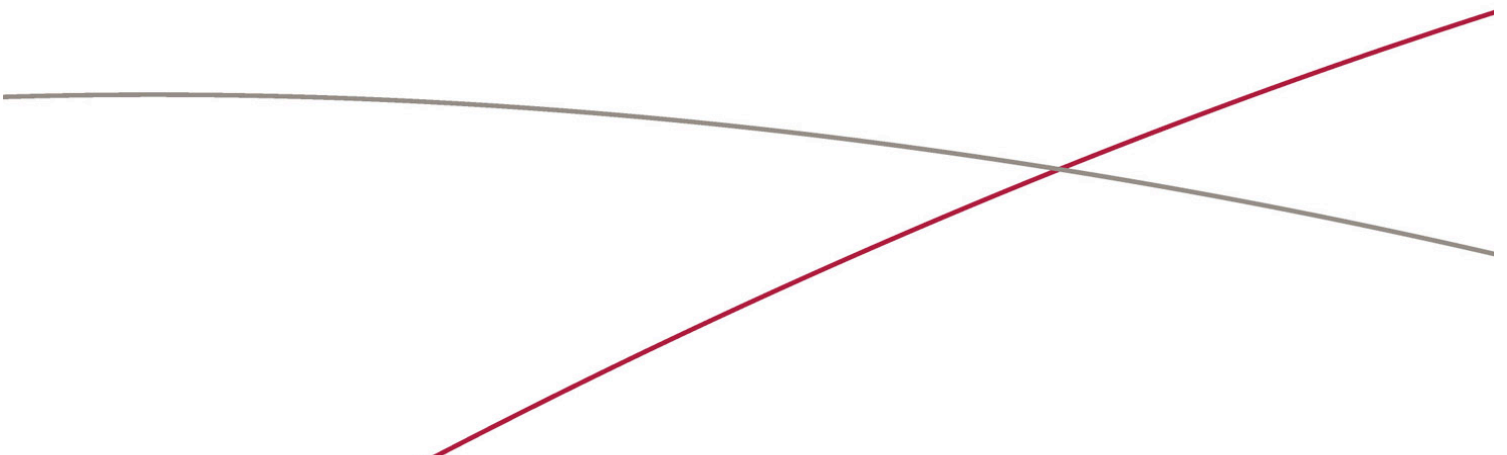
Exploring the industry's deadlock through the experiences of Swedish PR consultants

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Abstract

The State of the Art in PR Evaluation
- Exploring the industry's deadlock through the experiences of Swedish PR consultants

As the boundaries between different communication disciplines blur, PR experts are forced to operate in increasingly competitive business environments. They are pressured to prove the usefulness of their activities in measurable terms. Evaluation techniques are key to this challenge as they have the potential to win over organisational decision makers and to help steer communication programmes effectively.

By using qualitative interviews, this master thesis aims at understanding the state of the art in PR evaluation in Sweden. *State of the art*, in this case, is defined as the current level of development reached through existing methods. This research wants to contribute to the debate around the role of evaluation in PR by adding an understanding of what consultants believe influence their practices.

The study's results suggest that PR consultants perform evaluation measures merely to the degree the client demands, although this often involves very basic research methods. The findings also draw attention to a gap between theoretical best practises in PR evaluation and their actual implementation. The results moreover show possible pathways of influence responsible for this discrepancy. For instance, we see that consultants might be shaped by the state of PR (such as its poor reputation), the client's organisational culture, and her/his own personality. Overall, the findings implicate that PR agencies create a loop of pressure among each other by using unreliable evaluation methods. These combined influences should be validated in future research. For future studies, it is important to note that the thesis has been limited to agency settings. Therefore, it would be of value to include practitioner experiences in other environments.

Keywords: Public relations, Evaluation, Value, Agency settings, Consulting, Professionalisation, Practitioner perspective, Sweden

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Total number of words: 16 106.

Definition of Research Problem

Public relations (PR) can be viewed as an occupation that helps organisations and companies in staying updated on changes in public opinion by using strategic communication. PR specialists are, however, under an increased pressure to prove the usefulness of their activities in measurable terms (Yin, Krishnan & Ean, 2012). According to the Global Communication Report of 2017, boundaries between different communication disciplines will continue to blur, thereby creating implications for PR experts who work in all settings. For instance, the PR role runs the risk of being diminished as the competitive business environment increases.

Evaluation techniques are key to this challenge as they make it possible for "PR practitioners to speak with authority when asked to prove their value to the organisation" (Gregory & Watson, 2008, p. 42). On one hand, evaluation can be used to steer communication programmes more effectively. On the other hand, it is a strategy for gaining power in organisational decision-making processes. When being used correctly, evaluation has the potential to be a winning card in the convergence between joint disciplines. Not surprisingly, academia has historically encouraged PR specialists to undertake further evaluation programs (Laborde & Pompper, 2006) and has advocated that research should be applied to strategic and planning stages to influence management levels (Pieczka & L'Etang, 1999). Scholars and professional PR-institutes have meanwhile created a "myriad" (Place, 2015, p. 120) of frameworks, articles, toolkits and principles in how PR evaluation should be practised. However, studies often demonstrate that PR practitioners tend to ignore theoretical evaluation models, concepts and best practice advises. Based on this, we see a gap between what could be the true reality of PR practitioners, and, what might be, mainly utopian concepts in PR evaluation—thus outlined by dreamy spectators.

With a debate going on for decades, discussions are starting to become wearisome. As a consequence of 20 years of calls for improvement and with very little change, the PR evaluation debate is currently caught in a "deadlock" (Macnamara, 2015, p. 371) or a "stasis" (Gregory & Watson, 2008, p. 337).

Consequently, this master thesis attempts to address the complexity inherent in the situation. First, the study aims to understand the Swedish state of the art in PR evaluation—a geographic area previously overlooked in the literature. *State of the art*, in this case, is defined as: "The level of development (as of a device, procedure, process, technique, or science) reached at any particular time usually as a result of modern methods" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Although Swedish PR consultants might take part in large international surveys, a review of previous research reveals no key Swedish contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Simply put, we do not know how far Swedish PR consultants have come in their evaluation practises. Second, the thesis attempt to gain insights on influences responsible for the discrepancy in the PR evaluation deadlock. This by gaining insights into the challenges in PR practitioner's experiences. In worldwide research into barriers to the implementation of more advanced evaluation, practitioners frequently name lack of time, money and knowledge (e.g., Nikolic, Zoric, Terek, Glusac & Cockalo, 2016; Simmons & Watson, 2005; Xavier, Metha & Gregory, 2006). Studies however infrequently give individuals the opportunity to talk beyond predetermined answers. As an outcome, scholars merely scratch the surface of the issue. Future research should hence focus on individual perceptions, as there is lack of in-depth insights into why practitioners are limiting their evaluation approaches (Kabucua, Oriaso & Kiambati, 2016).

The thesis study at hand aims to position itself in the academic field by undertaking a qualitative study through in-depth interviews. Thereby, it contributes to the existing academic literature by dealing with a situation that calls for action in two ways: We must realise in what ways Swedish PR consultants evaluate their activities, and we should try to understand why. In other words, what are actually influencing their decisions? By gaining insight into the complexity inherent in PR practitioners experiences, this study has great potential to contribute to the non-existing body of knowledge in Sweden and to reveal explanations beyond the orthodox answers specified in the current PR evaluation literature.

Furthermore, the thesis views the state of the art with the eyes of professional identity and theoretical best practises in PR evaluation. It also takes into consideration the fact that the PR industry has been struggling with identity-related issues for a very long time. Quite recently, in 2012, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) completed an international crowd-sourced campaign that let people

vote for a modern definition of PR. This was an effort to finally conclude what the discipline should stand for and what its members should practise. Similarly, Fawkes (2015) argues that the PR industry is still re-defining how it should be a "commodity created for clients and employers" and a specific "contested terrain' as a field" (p. 675). Related to this, scholars and experts have tried to transform PR into a profession (Cameron, Sallot & Weaver-Lariscy, 1996). However, an occupation will only become a profession when its members agree to live up to existing standards and qualities of their crafts (Nayan, Samsudin, Othman & Tiung, 2012). Therefore, the future of the professionalisation of PR rests on its practitioners.

At the same time, PR experts have historically sought to find their professional identities (Hogg & Doolan, 1999; Fawkes, 2015). As the the PR role might become diverse in the integration of PR and marketing, the importance of "professionalism of public relations" might increase in the future (Ha & Ferguson, 2015, p. 1). This is, however, not easy as anyone who wishes to acquire professional status must make efforts to follow the existing standards of the profession. Hence, a person "has to set high standards of performance and seek excellence, not mediocrity: demonstrate eagerness, creativeness, and curiosity, not complacency" (VanZandt, 1990, p. 245). Essentially, viewing the state of the art through the eyes of best practises is notably significant as it might acknowledge the potential for the professionalisation of PR and its members.

Purpose of the study

The academic literature does not present contemporary research into the complexity inherent in PR evaluation practises in general—particularly not in Sweden. The purpose of the thesis is to explore the depth of evaluation practices among PR consultants from a Swedish perspective. Specifically, the aim is to present insight into how consultants see evaluation to be part of their every-day practices, and what might motivate and restrain their evaluation routines.

The thesis contributes to the evaluation debate by adding to our understanding the opportunities and barriers Swedish PR consultants encounter when proving the value of their work through evaluation. For Swedish PR practitioners, the results offer insights from colleagues into how evaluation is used, and possible challenges.

Research questions

In line with the purpose stated above, this thesis aims to provide insight into and understanding of approaches to evaluation used by PR consultants in Sweden by answering the following research questions:

What is the state of the art of PR evaluation in Sweden, from the consultant perspective?

What motivates and restrains consultants in their evaluation practises?

Describing two types of evaluation

Since PR is not a discipline with its own methodology, it uses various quantitative and qualitative methods and tools for collecting and analysing data (Phillips, 2005). Examples of evaluation techniques are focus groups, surveys, observations and content analysis - all of these are often drawn from the social sciences. Also, there are traditionally two different types of evaluation (Green & South, 2006). *Summative evaluation* applies towards the end of a program to provide a general picture over the impacts and the effectiveness of the PR program (Phillips, 2005). When summative evaluation is done right (i.e. when practitioners incorporate research in the beginning of projects to establish a baseline), it has the potential to give answers on what exactly one did, and in what ways, that might have led to the result.

Formative evaluation, on the other hand, is carried out from an early stage and to deliver a constant flow of insights that are used to improve communication processes (Noble, 1999). Formative evaluation contributes to organisational learning (Mark, Greene & Shaw, 2006) and help PR practitioners knowing whether the ongoing initiative is effective or not. Hence, understandings gained from "strategically integrated" formative evaluation have the potential to "support planning upcoming communication activities, adjusting strategies, or leading communication teams" (Zerfass, Verčič & Volk, 2017, p. 7).

Previous Research

The following chapter is organised thematically and research is chosen based on how well it helps the reader to grasp the context of the study. The history of PR evaluation has already been summarised by numerous scholars (e.g., Gregory & Watson, 2008; Likely & Watson, 2013; Lindenmann, 2005; Macnamara, 1997; 2014; Phillips, 2001; Puchan, Pieczka & L'Etang, 1999; Stacks & Michaelson, 2011; Watson, 2011; Watson & Noble, 2007, and most recently by Volk, 2016). All of these contributions are highly recommended if the reader wishes to become more deeply immersed in historical highlights. It can however be noticed that PR evaluation goes back a hundred years (Likely & Watson, 2013). According to Macnamara (2015), evaluation was practised among PR specialists long before the actual term *public relations* came to be used.

Searching for a "silver bullet"

There is an echo of themes that can be noticed in the PR evaluation literature. The emphasis on these themes, together with limited measurement techniques, might have led to negative effects such as distancing PR from strategic standpoints (Likely & Watson, 2013). A major mission has been to find one magical measure for PR that can be applied generally in many settings—called the "silver bullet" by Gregory and White (as cited in Gregory & Watson, 2008, p. 337). Almost ten years ago, L'Etang (2008) argued that very little development had taken place and that "evaluation has become and remains something of a 'holy grail' for public relations" (p. 26). More recently, Marklein and Paine have noticed "an international cry for March to standards in PR practice" (as cited in Kabucua, Oriaso & Kiambati, 2016, p 246). The problem, however, might not be that the PR industry is experiencing a lack of valid evaluation methods, techniques or single solutions as there are plenty of tools available that have already been implemented to some extent by practitioners (Macnamara, 2015). In contrast, Likely (2000) argue that the PR industry is still

missing a comprehensive framework that integrates all valuable contributions (such as intangible assets and organisational outgrowth). Whilst experts and scholars have taken part in a widespread debate for many years, there is still not a common agreement about "how to explain convincingly how public relations add value to an organization and how to measure this contribution" (Volk, 2016, p. 962). Since it exists numerous methods for measuring PR, the function might be destined to be circle around assumptions (Kabucua, Oriaso & Kiambati, 2016). This view is also shared with Likely and Watson (2013) and confirmed by Wright, Gaunt, Leggetter and Zerfass (2009) through a survey of 520 PR professionals. Results show that the PR field has not yet established a common ground on its greatest evaluation methodologies and measures. Similarly, Gregory and Watson (2008) verified a gap between PR academics and PR practitioners by investigating literature produced by academia and the PR industry. Findings, however, illustrate that theoretical studies have changed from calculating publicity to new research areas such as measuring the value of relations.

Barriers to PR evaluation

Although research supports the idea that evaluation practice and improved methods for measuring are perceived as essential by PR practitioners (Simmons & Watson 2004), their actual use remains limited (Kabucua, Oriaso & Kiambati, 2016). Findings from several studies have thus confirmed that PR practitioners mainly restrict their evaluation techniques to measuring outputs rather than impacts of messages (e.g., Gregory, 2001; Laskin, 2016; Moreno, Zerfass, Tench, Verčič & Verhoeven, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2017); Pinkleton, Austin & Dixon, 1999; Simmons & Watson 2005; Xavier, Johnston, Patel, Watson, & Simmons, 2005; Xavier, Mehta & Gregory, 2006; Xavier, Patel & Johnston, 2004; Wright & Hinson, 2015; Wright, Gaunt, Leggetter, & Zerfass, 2009; Yin, Krishnan & Ean, 2012;

Though research into PR evaluation and measurement has mostly been delivered from an American perspective (Volk, 2016), studies confirm that the practitioner's unwillingness to use advanced evaluation methods can be found all over the world. For instance, a recent study by Macnamara and Zerfass (2017) concluded that PR evaluation in Southeast Asia is limited and without trustworthy research methods. In other words, the strategy to demonstrate the value of PR is mainly to

show media coverage (Watson, 2005). This indicates that a practitioner's yardstick for success is based on how well he/she can get information out to the press, rather than on demonstrating the impact the published material might have had "on shifting opinion, awareness, or moving markets" (Wright, Gaunt, Leggetter & Zerfass, 2009, p. 12).

In Europe, Baskin, Hahn, Seaman and Reines (2010) found a gap between perceived effectiveness and the actual use of more sophisticated tools for analysis. The use of 13 out of 20 existing techniques for measuring PR performance had no relation with their perceived effectiveness. Counting clips was used more often among European PR experts than any other method. This is the case even though the technique has not been found to be effective. From this we can see that evaluation is very much talked about, but is hardly practiced (Gregory, 2001). This belief has, moreover, been supported by research from Yin, Krishnan and Ean (2012) in Malaysia. All together, the facts indicate that PR evaluation practice is in "stasis with a widely reported emphasis on output measurement especially focused on media relations" (Gregory & Watson, 2008, p. 337).

In research about barriers for implementation of more advanced evaluation methods, practitioners frequently identify lack of time, money and knowledge as main barriers (e.g., Nikolic et al., 2016; Simmons & Watson, 2005; Xavier, Metha & Gregory, 2006). Other research supports that organisational culture is more important than overall budget when it comes to implementing standards in PR evaluation and measurement (Thorson et al., 2015). A recent large-scale study delivered by Zerfass, Verčič and Volk (2017) explores the current state of the art in evaluation and measurement in Europe. Through a survey with 1,601 professionals in communication departments, three conclusions are made:

- Practitioners do not in general have the skills required to carry out rigorous evaluation (this is thus a key barrier to using further evaluation and measurement techniques).
- Media-related measures are most common.
- While organisations do apply evaluation to parts of their communications, insights gained are not often used to relate efforts with "organizational financial targets or intangible resources" (p. 14).

Similar findings have been seen in research by Simmons and Watson (2005) on attitudes among PR practitioners—evaluation is simply a torment, as many do not have enough research skills. In line with this, Macnamara (2015) critically argue that the PR evaluation debate is caught in a "deadlock" as the field has collected a vast amount of normative concepts and best practices without any practitioners following the lead (p. 371). In his paper, Macnamara explored the cause of the deadlock beyond traditional barriers such as lack of budget, knowledge and standards, and found hidden challenges. One final conclusion is that the PR industry must break out of a quantitative paradigm to "liberate PR and corporate communication from the straitjacket of positivist science to allow their true value to be revealed by complementing and supplementing quantitative research with insightful qualitative methods" (p. 379).

Conceptual Framework

This chapter describes a variety of theoretical perspectives that, together with previous chapters, makes up the framework on which the study rests upon. It will help the researcher to interpret findings and to place the studied phenomenon into a context. The chapter first examines the distinction between the terms *professions* (meso level) and *professionalism* (individual level). Academics Nayan, Samsudin, Othman and Tiung (2012) believe that an occupation only will become a profession when its members agree to live up to existing standards and qualities of their crafts. The chapter so moves on to presenting standards, principles and best practise in PR evaluation. Finally, the chapter presents a new system-approach to PR evaluation that combines the strengths of existing evaluation models. All parts in this chapter are significant as the ambition to gain full control of the attributes of a professional could be a strong inspiration for PR practitioners to implement best practices.

Professionalism and the implications for PR

Professions are specific fields of expertise with great prestige (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008). Professions also include experts with years of training that hold a specific role in the society (Wright, 1978). Many scholars have attempted to establish different criteria for how to differentiate professions from common occupations, and some agreements have been reached. Generally speaking, for an occupation to be developed into a profession, it must have a code of ethics, expert knowledge based on a solid theoretical foundation, a professional organ overseeing its members, and a strong jurisdiction over certification and how knowledge should be applied in practise (Bloland & Tempel, 2004).

Professionalisation is not only the process when an occupation successfully gains the status of a profession, it is also a matter of keeping the position (Abott, 1988). When applying the term in PR, it has commonly been related to a wish to gain a greater occupational position (Nayan, Samsudin, Othman, Tiung & 2012). Some academics (such as Falkheimer & Heide, 2014) however argue that PR has

not yet reached the status of a profession. For instance, the PR discipline is a field of individuals without any particular training or education (Gupta, 2007). As many practitioners do not follow any special codes for ethical behaviours, anyone can be accepted into the PR domain and can conduct his or her practise in their own way. In addition, PR is still lacking standards of qualification and licencing.

Personal commitment, responsibility and quality of craft

Professionalism, on the other hand, is an ideology that embraces the transmission to become a professional worker (Evetts, 2011). When discussing what professionalism means for PR, we must shift focus to individual practitioners and not the entire practise (Wright, 1978). Individual practitioners view professionalism as more appealing, as it concerns progressing identities, career options and sense-making (Evetts, 2011). PR practitioners who wish to acquire professional status must continuously make efforts to follow the existing standards of the profession. Moreover, they must "set high standards of performance and seek excellence, not mediocrity: demonstrate eagerness, creativeness, and curiosity, not complacency" (VanZandt, 1990, p. 245). In South Africa, Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes (2008) found that PR practitioners are making limited attempts to "professionalize their activities" (p. 224). Meanwhile, the South-African PR governing body does not take responsibility for matters related to its members' development in professionalisation. Although both sides stress the value and signification of professionalism, they claim that it is the others responsibility to stimulate any progress.

Professionalism in PR concerns more than just the features of a profession—such as getting a license from a governing body, special skills and qualifications (see table 1). It is also about characteristics such as the ability to think reasonably, the level of creativity, and other essential proficiencies (Abduallah, 2012). In the same vein, VanZandt (1990) argues that professionalism must be based on individualism. That is, practitioners must realise that they are in full control of these attributes—no one else can make you act professionally. This means that although PR itself might not have reached the societal status as a profession (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014), its practitioners can still have professional qualities (VanZandt, 1990). Likewise, Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes (2008) argue that "the future of the profession is in the hands of its practitioners. The question is whether they are

prepared to take responsibility for what they are doing, and find creative ways of dealing with a difficult situation" (p. 224). According to Piccitotto, an occupation thus only becomes a profession when its practitioners successfully agree to "quality standards in the conduct of their craft" (as cited in Nayan, Samsudin, Othman & Tiung, 2012, p. 46).

Professionalism

The way in which a person relies on a personal high standard of competence in providing professional services
The means by which a person promotes or maintains the image of the profession
A persons willingness to pursue professional development opportunities that will continue to improve skills within the profession
The pursuit of quality and ideals within the profession
A persons sense of pride about the profession

Table 1 Source: VanZandt (1990, p. 243).

According to Wright (1978), the actual power and status of a professional person relates to a specific type of expertise that cannot be found in any other occupational group. This uniqueness creates value. Throughout history, the ideology of professionalism has altered the idea that certain expertise can "justify the assumption that only the professional can determine the real needs of the client" (p. 5). As a consequence, clients do not have the capacity to go against the professional judgement of the situation. Paul Starr argued in 1984 that professional authority forms particular situations in which clients depend on superior competence. This notion of dependency has, however, received negative attention, as traditional attitudes among professionals can be viewed as patronizing towards the client. Concepts such as "client rights" have been established in counteraction (Eraut, 1994, p. 5).

Professions are nevertheless still about trust and competences (Evetts, 2005). According to Bloland and Tempel (2004), the basis of trust "will be found in the belief by stakeholders that professionals in the field are experts" (p. 14). Without trust, Bloland and Tempel further claim that the level of status of the profession

might quickly be weakened. In an era where the importance of accountability is growing larger each day, professionals "must know how to demonstrate that the things to which we have committed ourselves have been done and done well" (VanZandt, 1990, p. 244). In addition, a professional must have strong negotiation skills, as well as competencies in consultation (Evetts, 2005). However, many business leaders (and scholars) in PR have stressed the need for further competencies among PR practitioners as today's PR practice is not very complex or advanced (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008).

All in all, the notion of professionalism should be appealing as it stems from self-control and where supervision from management is not required (Evetts, 2011). Indeed, there is no need to oversee professional employees. This means that PR practitioners could, through professionalism, once and for all, liberate themselves from the suffering of low credibility (Abdullah, 2006). However, it is important to consider Ha and Ferguson's (2015) thoughts: "One of the most perplexing problems facing public relations is the lack of a common professional framework" (p. 2). We must therefore strive to "understand more of what constitutes professionalism for communication professionals (Falkheimer, Heide, Simonsson, Zerfass and Verhoeven, 2016, p. 24).

Best practises in PR evaluation

The term *best practices* can be seen as a concept with many sides. On one side, it can be viewed as a procedure that is designed to successfully reach planned ends. Best practices are then used when solid methods are applied for connecting activities to "specific outcomes or objectives" (Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele & Wu, 2004, p. 309). On the other side, best practices can also have a greater impact on a practitioner's every-day work and on making organisations more effective. In this thesis, the following definition by Stacks and Michaelson (2014) is used to represent the term best practise:

> In essence, a best practice is a technique, a method, a process, or an activity, which is more effective at delivering a particular outcome than any other technique, method, process, or activity. By using best practices,

projects, tasks, and activities can be accomplished more effectively and
with fewer problems and complications.

(p. 15)

In addition, PR evaluation requires a range of different methods and techniques
and cannot be done satisfactorily through one simple tool alone. Practitioners who
apply best practises in PR evaluation must use a distinct process and include a range
of quantitative and qualitative measures that are suited to the current situation. In
line with this, Wilcox et al. state that "in most cases, a skilled practitioner will use
a combination of methods to evaluate the effectiveness of a program" (as cited in
Watson & Noble, 1999, p. 6). Meanwhile, there is a "myriad" (Place, 2015, p. 120)
of theoretical best practises, toolkits, methods and principles in PR evaluation.
These have been published thanks to initiatives of both academics and professional
PR bodies (Volk, 2016).

Among the most important practical contributions made to the PR evaluation
literature is a guidebook by Stacks and Michaelson in 2014 (Volk, 2016). Stacks
and Michaelson, however, developed their handbook based on Michaelson and
Macleod's (2007) framework for best practices in PR evaluation. This framework
stresses that relying only on the evaluation of intermediaries (such as media) is not
satisfactory, as this would diminish the opportunity to develop effective evaluation
and measurement structures. Using approaches beyond intermediaries increases the
possibility for deeper analytical judgments that are necessary for improving com-
munication results. Basic evaluation ignores the foundation of best practices and is
the "key reason why public relations measurement and evaluation has failed to pro-
gress significantly over the past 25 years" (Michaelson & Macleod, 2007, p. 3).
Furthermore, the model includes nine different best practices that underpin possi-
bilities for generating a consistent group of measures for PR efforts (see table 2).
All areas are vital when it comes to creating best practice in PR research, and for
helping improve communication programmes. It should be noted that these ap-
proaches are each a part of every stage of the research procedure, from the begin-
ning of a project to the actual ending and the delivery of a final report.

Broad area 1: The use of specific research methods and procedures

1. Setting clear and well defined research objectives;
2. Applying rigorous research design that meets highest standards of research methods and ensures reliable research results; and
3. Providing detailed supporting documentation with full transparency.

Broad area 2: The application of measures that examine both the quality and the substance of public relations activities

1. Designing the research to demonstrate the effectiveness of public relations activities
2. Linking public relations outputs to outcomes
3. Using the findings to aid in the development of better communications programs
4. Demonstrating an impact on business outcomes
5. Being cost effective; and
6. Having applicability to a broad range of public relations activities

Table 2. Source: Michaelson and Macleod (2007, p. 4-10.)

Best practice statements from professional PR industry bodies

In 2011, Stacks and Michaelson noticed a lack of consensus on commonly used standards in PR evaluation. The authors noticed that "the concept of standard measures is increasingly debated within the public relations universe, but attempts to develop these measures remain primitive and possibly misunderstood by significant proportions of public relations professionals and academics, and by the measurement and evaluation community" (p. 1). The lack of standardisation of measurements in PR inspired sixteen international PR bodies to come together in 2010 to create the international standards called the Barcelona Principles (see table 3, p. 15).

Reflections on AVEs

In addition, advertising value equivalents (AVEs) have commonly been used as a way to place value on media coverage (Volk, 2016) and for measuring the supposed value of PR or journalistic publicity (Macnamara, 2006). Boersman and Bowen explain that the value is calculated by measuring the area in media coverage

and "multiplying the time and space by advertising rates" (as cited in Kabucua, Oriaso, & Kiambati, 2016, p. 248). The total number often ends up being very high (often thousands or millions of dollars) and representing "earned" money during that period and what the cost would have been when advertising instead of gaining editorial publicity. AVEs have been a hot topic for discussion and have received a large number of critiques from scholars and experts (e.g., AMEC, 2015; Kabucua, Oriaso, & Kiambati, 2016; Macnamara, 2006; 2014; Volk, 2016) who have disclaimed the method for falsely suggesting the value of PR. The metric has been judged superficial and is said to miss the in-depth value of PR, mainly because it favours outreach over other long-term outcomes. Methods and calculating strategies also usually differ between organisations, agencies or even between practitioners – thus giving very little room for trustworthy comparisons. In 2016, The Chartered Institute for Public Relations (CIPR) released six principles on best practices in measurement and evaluation. Most important for this thesis, the principles state that AVEs do not represent the true value of PR.

Barcelona Principles 2.0 (revised 2015)

Goal setting and measurement are fundamental to communication and public relations.
Measuring communication outcomes is recommended versus measuring only outputs.
The effect on organisational performance can and should be measured where possible.
Measurement and evaluation require qualitative and quantitative methods.
AVEs are not the value of communications.
Social media can and should be measured consistently with other media channels
Measurement and evaluation should be transparent, consistent, and valid.

Table 3. Source: AMEC, 2015.

The importance of setting measurable PR-objectives

A significant part of effective PR evaluation is setting starting points that allow comparisons. By setting measurable objectives, PR practitioners can make judgments of research findings and determine whether the specific aims have been accomplished (Watson & Noble, 2007). This was early noted by Hehir who once said that "evaluation based on measurable PR objectives is the golden bridge over which public relations can march into the promised land of corporate respectability and enhanced resources" (as cited in Noble, 1999, p. 17). Only after setting objectives

for what the program or campaign should be and what success means, will it become possible to select best methods for assessing the progress. Thereafter, the best methods for data-collection can be chosen (Green & South, 2006). Likewise, Lindenmann (2003) argue that there is really no way to "measure the effectiveness of anything" if one does not "first figure out exactly what it is they are measuring that something against" (p. 5). This means that PR-practitioners must ask questions about the specific goals or objectives for the programme, campaign or activities they are working within. Setting goals for PR in integrated environments is just as important. What does the campaign or program wish to achieve via PR?

Moreover, Watson and Noble (2007) claim that the nature of the PR objective itself plays an important role as it will determine what evaluation techniques is required to measure its results. For example, if the objective is behavioural, then it will be a challenge to accomplish the effects and to evaluate them. In comparison, if the objective is uncomplicated, such as gaining exposure, the evaluation will also be made accordingly. In other words, the type and complexity of the objective truly matters. It will guide the practitioner when choosing what evaluation techniques are necessary to evaluate the campaign, programme or project.

Applying dimensions to PR evaluation

A vast number of models and frameworks exist for evaluating PR. These have not brought a consensus in the field, but rather a state of confusion (Xavier, Patel & Johnston, 2004; Watson & Noble, 2007). Laskin (2016) therefore observed strengths and weaknesses of existing models and created an alternative process that includes a structure of metrics and influences that have not yet been considered. The heretical "system includes quantitative and qualitative measures aimed at intermediary effects, target audience influences, organizational bottom-line measures, and industry-level metrics" (p. 3). The approach was initially tested through a survey with 122 PR professionals in 2016—results validated its relevance to PR agency settings.

Agency level: Output

Output is the foundation on which all other evaluation levels are based. *Outputs* means all the efforts, materials, goods and services created to achieve the outcomes

(Green & South, 2006). Outputs can therefore include press releases, relations with opinion-leaders, phone calls (Laskin, 2016) and so on. Basically, it is all the work that the agency has made during the early phase of a campaign on behalf of the client. This is an important stage since it provides the agency most control during the entire process. As the level of focus is on the agency itself and its efforts, it supports both the agency and the client when it comes to evaluating what parts were successful, and how the work should be designed in the future. Importantly, Macnamara (1997) early noticed that it exists little understanding concerning outputs as "PR practitioners make many micro-decisions as part of their daily work without consciously thinking of them or critically evaluating them" (p. 12).

Intermediary/media level: Outreach

The next step moves outside the agency walls, and on to the intermediary level and the reach acquired from the outputs. Laskin (2016) argues that all work would be made for nothing if the outputs never leave agency. Messages usually do not travel directly to target audiences but go through intermediaries such as bloggers, mass media and opinion leaders. Therefore, this level of evaluation pays attention to "the intermediaries and the channels of communications to measure how far and wide the produced message was able to reach" (Laskin, 2016, p. 12). Similarly, Lindenmann (2003) believes that these are "usually the immediate results of a particular PR program or activity" (p. 5) such as exposure. However, a client might be more interested in, and benefit from, insights beyond press clippings. For instance, they should know whether the message has been communicated to relevant audiences and in significant forums. Hence, Laskin (2016) argues that qualitative approaches must be applied at these levels, as these "measures can significantly enhance the relevance and accuracy of the measurements on the intermediary level" (p. 13).

Target audience level: Outcome

Making questions on this level could help determine whether the audience became aware of the message. Did they actually understand what we meant? Did attitudes change, and what actions were taken? Outcomes are important as outreach and media-measures do not actually say anything about long-term effects. Also, outcomes do not ignore the nature of persuasion. Furthermore, it has been argued that the PR

industry must try to advance its evaluation to focus less on short-term results and more on the value that its outcomes provide (Macnamara, 2014). Minimum criteria for actually seeing a PR campaign as successful should therefore be to determine whether the communicated message really has brought any changes among the target audience (Laskin, 2016). Having 100 stories published in media does not guarantee that a certain amount of the target audience has cared about or understood the message. As cognitive changes related to outcomes—such as attitudes, beliefs and behaviours—alter over a period time and usually as a consequence of multiple influences, methods for measuring outcomes require advanced qualitative approaches "such as longitudinal interview-based studies, ethnography and even ethnomethodology" (Macamamara, 2014, p. 24).

Organisational level: Outgrowth

The organisational level shifts focus from measuring the target audience and their intended purchase actions to calculating business turnovers, increased members, votes and so on for the client. In brief, the level "evaluates what actually grew out of the seeds of the campaign and what return was generated for the client" (Laksin, 2016, p. 15). According to Lindenmann (2003) and (Pohl, 2009), it is essential that PR practitioners describe how their efforts contribute to bottom-line results. Historically, the PR field has experienced an obvious shift from focusing on intermediary levels to examining the actual effectiveness of a campaign with favourable results (such as positive reputation and relationships) and connecting these results to the organisational value as whole (Volk, 2016). Terms for putting financial value into measurement of PR have often been called return-on-investment (ROI). PR practitioners have thus experienced an increased pressure to evaluate their work with this type of business language (Likely & Watson, 2013). However, to be able to evaluate this level, an agency must gain data from the actual client.

Industry level: Outperform

The last level focus on parameters outside the organisation and is referred to as the industry level. In simple terms, evaluation at this level measures the setting in which the organisation is operating in. A campaign with the aim to increase the company sales "can fall short of its goal because of the lack of communications produced or

because of the general economic downturn with the decline of sales across the whole industry" (Laskin, 2016 p. 16). The industry level provides the PR agency with important insights into the development of the overall industry, potential competition, if the clients market share has changed and so on. Laskin finally argues that this type of evaluation contributes validation and reliability when assessing a campaign and its results, and that it can actually be the part that makes it or breaks it.

Research Design and Methodology

The purpose of the thesis in your hand is to understand the level of development in PR evaluation in Sweden. In other words; to realise the state of the art with the view from the PR consultants. Also, the thesis attempts to understand the anomaly presented in the previous literature on the PR evaluation deadlock. This by going deeper into what motivates and restrain the consultants in their evaluation practises. The thesis further views the state of the art with the eyes of professional identity and theoretical best practises in PR evaluation. It also takes into consideration the fact that the PR industry has struggled with identity-related issues for a long time.

At the beginning of this study, an initial idea was to use qualitative approaches in order to answer the research questions and meet the aims of the thesis. The choice was not easy, as both qualitative and quantitative methods offer many different advantages that can deliver insight into the chosen subject. After some time of thoughtful deliberation, a shift was however made to quantitative methods since this would create an opportunity to test objective theories and generalise results (Creswell, 2014). After designing a survey, attempts were made to access participants. It, however, became clear that it was impossible to reach participants within the given time frame. I therefore returned to the idea of using qualitative methods to reach a deeper understanding from the point of view of the consultant. The shift made it possible to examine how PR consultants reason and feel on an intellectual level about evaluation as part of their daily practise.

In line with the qualitative approach, the constructivist worldview was embraced, as this grasps how common groups, such as PR consultants, develop patterns of behaviour (Creswell, 2014) that can be studied. Similarly, Rubin and Rubin (2005) argue that scholars with a constructivist worldview focus on presenting shared meanings that are incorporated in cultural backdrops: i.e., groups, such as PR practitioners, that hold common ideas, meanings or opinions about how evaluation should be carried out today.

Furthermore, interpretivism has been this thesis' epistemological approach. In general terms, this means revealing meanings constructed by individuals (Smith, 2002). The stance is thus drawn from social constructivism which has been thesis' ontological approach: "Reality that we live and work in is built up over time trough communication, with those around us, and our shared history" (Daymon and Holloway, 2002, p. 5). However, it is usually difficult to avoid being critical when carrying out interpretive research (Pozzebon, 2004). The thesis therefore incorporates some elements of critical thinking, as this might stimulate future research into the conditions that lead to the restriction of the status quo in the PR evaluation. This decision has added value to the thesis for numerous reasons.

First, individuals who conduct interpretive inquiries should embrace a neutral stance. However, Baker and Bettner (1997) argue that it is not likely for any researcher in reality to hold a truly neutral stance, and that it is more honest to accept a critical perspective even in the interpretative traditions. Second, "being critical may simply imply probing taken-for-granted assumptions inherent in the status quo by being critically reflective, while utilizing whatever theoretical framework is chosen" (Pozzebon, 2004, p. 278). After all, combining interpretivism and critical thinking can result in highly awarding research (Pozzebon & Pinsonneault (2004). When following thoughts by Schultze (2000), the thesis has thereby the potential to challenge its readers to "re-examine their own taken-for granted assumptions" about the state of the art in PR evaluation, and to provoke them "to answer questions" (p. 30). In addition, Alvesson and Sköldberg discuss reflections during empirical work:

Aspect/Level	Focus
1) **Interaction with empirical material**	1) Accounts in interviews, observations of situations and other empirical materials
2) **Interpretation**	2) Underlying meanings
3) **Critical interpretation**	3) Ideology, power, social reproduction
4) **Reflection on text production and language use**	4) Own text, claims to authority, selectivity of the voices represented in the text

Table 4. Source: Demonstrated in Pozzebon (2004, p. 279)

Qualitative interviews

In line with the studies interpretivist stance, interviews were identified as the best way to obtain empirical material to answer the studies research questions. Interviews were however chosen after carefully considering potential downsides. Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) highlights general criticism towards interviews. For instance, some argue that interviews are simply subjective in nature, rather than objective. Others stress that interviews mainly reflects common sense and should not be viewed as a scientific approach. Essentially, the researchers own social expectations and assumptions could create biases, thus imposing the study. However, biases can be avoided by self-reflection with the researcher before entering the interview. Despite these downsides, the advantages were considered much greater.

In comparison with quantitative research in which the structure is usually inflexible and designed to maximize reliability and validity in main hypotheses (Bryman, 2012), the interpretive researcher uses qualitative interviews as a strategy for "exploring the meanings, ideas, feelings, intentions of various stakeholders or publics, and of those involved in managing formal communications" (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 220). Qualitative interviews thus offer the researcher insights into what individuals sees as important and relevant, consequently providing separate meanings (Bryman, 2012).

Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were chosen as technique. According to Daymon and Holloway (2011), semi-structured interviews use an interview guide of questions and themes that are essential for the studied topic. By using an interview guide, it was possible to gather comparable information from all participants (Appendix B). In addition, the method was flexible, as it allowed me, in each interview, to follow up responses and explore the research questions further. While the interview guide was developed to involve questions related to the studies research questions, it was separately based on previous research and theories (presented in chapters two and three). These chapters thereby created a direction for the interviews (Larsson, 2010).

Sampling

Sampling in qualitative research methods refers to meeting challenges such as what participants are most relevant when studying a chosen phenomenon (Larsson,

2010). The strategy for sampling in the thesis is purposeful in nature, which is a non-probability approach to sampling. This means that participants have been selected based on their relevance to the research questions and on how well they contribute. They have also been chosen for variety: i.e., by how their characteristics differ from each other (Bryman, 2012). As PR evaluation exists beyond specific geographical boundaries, the phenomenon could be studied in numerous places (Larsson, 2010). Therefore, interviews were held in Gothenburg and Stockholm.

If the researcher is seeking for individual meanings and values inherent in a multifaceted phenomenon, the researcher and the participant should meet for a personal interview. Despite the benefits of telephone interviews, this type is more often used when the information is less complex (Larsson, 2010). Consequently, the intention was to conduct all interviews in person.

A total of 20 PR consultants working at 18 different PR/communication/advertising agencies were approached by email and asked to partake in the study. The participants were chosen to represent different years of experience, agency settings and hierarchy levels in the Swedish PR industry. Ultimately, six PR consultants based in Gothenburg and eight PR consultants based in Stockholm participated in the study (view appendix A for an overview of interviewees). Interviews were held between March 28 and April 5, 2017. Except for one telephone interview, all meetings were done personally. The average time for each interview was 44 minutes.

Analysing the data

An initial test interview was carried out with a PR-specialist over Skype on March 2017. Larsson (2010) recommend test interviews, as these can indicate whether the guide is suitable, if the questions are fulfilling, missing or should be deleted. The test interview led to three main alterations in the interview guide: 1. More examples were added for clarification of questions, 2. The concept of evaluation was explained in each interview, 3. The language was made less formal. Furthermore, audio recording was chosen, as it provides the best opportunities when transcribing interviews, thereby giving the interviewer the liberty to have deep focus to the selected topic and the dynamic in the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Literature on interviews as method often states that recorded conversations should be transcribed in their fullness with all words articulated, including pauses. However,

to save recourses, the researcher has the ability to exclude parts that obviously do not contribute to the analysis, such as "irrelevant digressions", as it is always possible to go back to the recordings for re-consideration (Larsson, 2010, p. 69). These disregarded pieces have been specified in the transcriptions. Also, all interviews were all held and transcribed in Swedish.

Regarding procedures for making sense of the findings, I have used abductive reasoning, as I have moved between theory and empirical material to reach an understanding (Bryman, 2012). Hence, I involved existing theory (presented in earlier chapters) when constructing the interview guide and research questions. At the same time, inductive sense making was used through insights into the empirical material. Therefore, the qualitative approach of this thesis created possibilities for the empirical findings to develop the existing body of knowledge.

Furthermore, thematic content analysis was used for making sense of the transcribed interviews. Following advice by Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick (2008), I first completed open coding, which means that I read each transcript separately and made notes in the margin with short summarising phrases. The next step was to collect all codes on a new page and start to read the document as an entire piece, looking for similar patterns between the interviews. These patterns were highlighted with different colours and collected on the new page together with the codes. As a final and separate process, I actively searched for sections that contradicted already identified patterns and themes. After narrowing down themes, quotes to be presented in the thesis were translated from Swedish to English.

Quality of the study

The researcher plays a role when it comes to the quality of the knowledge produced during a study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). This means that I had to use reflexivity and had to reason about how my own values, ethical standpoints, pre-existing knowledge and interests could have influenced the interviewees. Writing a literature review meant that I had theoretical pre-knowledge about PR evaluation when entering the interview situation. However, this pre-knowledge was beneficial as it helped me to grasp what the interviewees described, and to ask probing questions. As I had theoretical knowledge about theoretical best practises in PR evaluation, it

was important to maintain a professional stance. This by continuously try to understand the situation from the point of view of the participant, and not make judgments about whether their practises were right or wrong.

Ethical considerations were made based on advice from Kvale and Brinkmann (2014). This means that each interview started by gaining an informed consent. The participant received information about the purpose of the study, was told that attendance is voluntarily, and was advised that she/he could end the interview anytime without explaining why. Confidentiality and consequences for the interview was also taken into account, as the identities of the participant and the agency have been protected in both the final thesis and the transcriptions.

In any study, it is vastly important that the research strategy address the chosen purpose and research questions. In this case, the aim was to understand the complexity inherent in the state of art in PR evaluation. Not only was it a necessity to understand in what ways Swedish PR consultants evaluate their work, but also to find out what they believe influence their decisions. A flexible scientific approach (such as that provided by interviews) then is needed for revealing the interviewees own frameworks of meanings related to evaluation and their job efforts. Quantitative methods, for instance, would have limited the participants to a sheet of predetermined answers. As the literature review suggests, there is a need for contributions that can bring new theoretical implications that can be further examined.

Findings

As stated in the previous chapter, this study uses a thematic analysis to make sense of the transcribed interviews. At a first glance, a thematic analysis in qualitative research might appear easy as it results in short codes and motifs. However, the task is highly challenging as transcripts usually cover many contradictions and different stories (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). By going back and forth in the transcribed material, six central themes are identified and summarised below. A *theme*, in this case, can be viewed as a pattern that has a relation to the study and the research questions—identified by the analyst (Bryman, 2012). Worth remembering, the ambition of this chapter is to point at larger patterns and distinct views, by presenting small parts of texts (Eksell & Thelander, 2014).

Part 1: The state of the art		*Part 2: Motivations and barriers*	
Theme 1	Routines/ Standards	Theme 4	Recourses/ Standards
Theme 2	Potentials/ Actual practises	Theme 5	The Client
Theme 3	The use of AVE's	Theme 6	The Consultant

Table 4: Identified themes in the transcripts.

Part 1: The state of the art

Theme 1: Routines/Standards

The empirical material shows that the interviewed participants often experience lacking evaluation routines. For instance, many do not mention templates for how evaluation should look like between projects. The interviews give a common view that evaluation techniques vary between projects, and, sometimes, between consultants working at the same agency. However, there are signs of unspoken routines. For instance, interviewee C stress that it is "natural to evaluate in some kind of way"

although the agency does not have any standards. Very similar, interviewee P, with 20 years of work experience, stress that it differs between consultants and clients. Having said that, the agency however does evaluation to some extent. "I believe it exists—the consultants that work here probably have a standard in their head that are equal to their minimum-standard which I believe is pretty accurate with everyone", she added. In addition, the empirical material generally express positive attitudes towards creating routines:

> You *want* to be able to say that we have routines. That we used a certain
> way in the last campaign and that evaluation is really important for us. […]
> I believe we must create routines, and I think it must exist further ambitions
> to follow up things and to become better at evaluation.
> *Interviewee B*

Although routines are not common in the empirical material, some interviewees stand out. For instance, interviewee N always divides evaluation into three stages— idea, implementation and results. Discussion are furthermore always based on these parameters. Much like this, interviewee J always evaluate her efforts. "We always work with evaluation regardless the task we are facing", she said.

Setting measurable objectives

When asked the question if it exists any routines for setting clear objectives, the interviewees often believe that this also vary between clients and projects. It appears that there are no systematic approaches for setting objectives or for linking them with long-term goals. Surprisingly, some consultants cannot remember setting objectives in the latest project, such as interviewee I:

> It's a good question because we did not set any objectives. The expectations have been quite unclear during this campaign […] It kind of still feels like I don't know—it's weird that you don't know what the goal with your job is. [laugh]

Interviewee C further discuss lacking interest:

> Things are more unspoken between each other during meetings. It is nothing we have written down on paper. Objectives do exist, but I likewise experience a lack of performance management in some of the tasks we are doing […] In practise, this is maybe the part that is ignored. You can sit and talk about your willingness to *"Now we will look at this and measure"*, but in the end, it will still be *"Let's just do it"*.

The quote expresses an attitude that there are many discussions about the importance of evaluation, but that implementations becomes ignored in practise. One example of this is interviewee B who "rather did a follow up" and then concluded "well, this looked good" in her latest project. At the same time as systematic approaches appears to be missing, some consultants wish they had found a standard by now. However, other respondents feel that their doing quite well when it comes to setting objectives. For instance, interviewee J claim that she make sure to include a discussion with the client in the beginning of all projects about what results are important. In these discussions, the purpose, the idea and the objectives are determined. A similar attitude is found with I:K who follow up objectives at least once every third month. He then asks questions such as "Have we set the objective too high or too low? Do we need to change anything to reach the goal?".

Theme 2: Potentials/Actual Practises

When asked if PR impacts are evaluated, such as attitudes and behaviours, the interviewees usually feel that such evaluation is difficult. As a consequence, evaluating outcomes are not a priority today among most of the consultants. Evaluation are thus not used do find out whether a "campaign have changed my attitude towards question x" (I:P). Instead, agencies measure awareness "quite rough" through publications in traditional and social media, and then "esteem that this, in some way, reflexes the awareness about the company" (I:P). Interviewee E, owner of a PR agency, likewise mainly assesses publicity as this is "easy to display". Also, "The rest is often a complex package, so it is often hard to say what our contribution is", she added.

In addition to all this, many respondents feel that their evaluation techniques have the purpose to assess short-term impacts:

> Of course it can feel that it is rather short-term focused—this is a project we have been working with […] over one year. And then one week after launch, you are supposed to send: "*This was the impact, thank you, and good bye*".
> *Interviewee I*

> I generally experience that the communication industry must become better when it comes to thinking long-term and that the efforts I do now, might not get an effect right now, but will create a value further along. […] A campaign's long-term effects; I would say that we are lacking behind there.
> *Interviewee B*

Another common notion in empirical material is that clients usually are responsible for the implementation of more advanced evaluation techniques. For instance:

> Long-term objectives usually imply that we want to change how the brand is perceived over a period of time, and that requires a pretty large measurement. That is not what we do here. […] the responsibility is often on the client to make those measurements.
> *Interviewee N*

> I think it would be a blast if you could measure ___ movement over time. However, there is no one interested among them [the client] to do so. In addition, the person working with communication have *nothing* to say about that.
> *Interviewee M*

A question was thereafter asked whether evaluation is set out to determine impacts on organisational performance. Interestingly, nearly all interviewees answered no. One common opinion is that it is just too complicated to prove that PR

contributes to bottom-line results. Another example is interviewee B, working at a full-service agency, who believes that it is difficult to separate the PR function from advertising. "What is one or the other? If you can show a growth in sales, it is still hard to say—you contribute to the overall result", she said. Interviewee P speak about similar experiences:

> For me to be able to claim that connection, I would have to connect what I do with the business […] generally, we are pretty bad on measuring, but then, we are really bad at measuring business value. *"What have this generated?"*
> *Interviewee P*

Proving increased sales appears to be extra difficult for the interviewed consultants as "there are so many things that would contribute to those results" (I:N). However, other participants believe that it is indeed possible, but that the agency must then ask the client for such insights:

> I very often experience that the client has those numbers. We must, with some curiosity, have a dialogue with the client. […] if it is something we are proud of and want to present on our website or use as sales pitch, we might get access to those numbers in some way.
> *Interviewee B*

Qualitative/Quantitative research

When going through the transcripts, it becomes clear that the interviewed consultants often uses rudimentary research methods. Although there is a sign of interest of using qualitative insights, it appears that quantitative research techniques are more often applied in reality. This mainly because of client demands. Interviewee D, for instance, stress:

> More than anything else, I am a friend of qualitative evaluation. Some clients might want to have many appearances; it looks quite delightful

when the information manager, or whoever is presenting it, can say *"Look, this many have written about us".*

Interviewee D elaborates on the matter and state that today's measures "are quantitative in nature, however, throughout the years, things have become more qualitative focused". Others claim that they can bee more detailed and used qualitative measures for interpreting the quantitate data, such as looking at tonality. When not doing so, there is a risk that quantitative results are delivered out of context: "If one magazine writes then it's a tick in the box and one impact. Okay, then we can measure some quantitative bullshit about it" (I:L). Another perspective related to this pattern is that PR is uncertain and need tangible proof. For instance, interviewee B feel that "it is a lot of numbers, really" because "something must be concrete, as in in our industry, a lot of things are not". Others talk about the negative sides of using quantitative measures:

> Sometimes my work feels diminished […] *"Now we will quantify to numbers and thousands"* when really … PR stands for public relations and relations is not quantifiable, instead it is all about quality […] I experience that this norm has been caught from a time where you could do quantitative studies, or reports, about how things went.
> *Interviewee I*

> […] there are a lot of underlying blood, sweat and tears that are difficult to reflect in a report of results. Of course it is more obvious If things have gone well, but it is hard to show the impact one actually have made and it is very quantitative in terms of reach… it does not say anything about the PR craft or anything else, it does not reflect efforts made.
> *Interviewee O*

Theme 3: The use of AVEs

The empirical material suggest that AVEs are often used to prove the value of PR—13 interviewees explain that they use it as an evaluation technique today. Interest-

ingly, almost all consultants are negative towards using the metric and never recommend clients to use it. AVEs are however used since they are the "only tool available" — although they are "obtuse" and "misleading" (I:A). Not only are high numbers "damn pleasing" (I:C), they are also a strategy for gaining acknowledgment:

> Somewhere, there is a value, but there is no way to set a great number on it. […] I must admit that focus tend to be more on quantity and that you almost drool when you see those 25 million. It is also a great sales pitch for us to say "*Hey, you get 26 million but it only cost you 140 thousand*". Of course, this gives an acknowledgment from the client that it is worth the money and for us that we have delivered something.
> *Interviewee L*

> To a large part, PR is about defending its discipline in relation to advertising and paid space. You want to say "*We got this for free. If we would have paid for it; it would have cost this much*". I only do this if we have routines on it, from previous clients for example. Otherwise, it is not something I try to pitch.
> *Interviewee B*

In comparison to common negative attitudes identified in the empirical material, two consultants have positive attitudes towards AVE's. For instance, interviewee E believe the metric is helpful. "It is important to be able to compare", she said.

Part 2: Motivations and barriers

Theme 4: Lacking Resources/Standards

In the empirical material, the interviewed practitioners argue that their evaluation practises mainly depend on resources, such as time and money:

> Of course it would be possible to dig deeper into this and say, *"We must become better at following up and what have evolved within the evaluation discipline?"* […] Many times, it is often because the client must pay *for this part. We will not give it away, as a free treat.*
> *Interviewee B*

> At same time as I can feel that I am not satisfied with how things are now, I do not really know how to change it. […] it would require a lot of work to proceed, and there is no time for that.
> *Interviewee L*

The last quote tells us that although a consultant is dissatisfied with its current research techniques, she/he does not know how make things better. For instance, interviewee P would "like to measure the starting point" but that "clients often consider them too expensive to apply". In general, it appears that the consultants must be deeply pragmatic and need to rationalise the given budget.

The wish for standards

Another pattern in the empirical material is that the Swedish PR industry is given great responsibility for making changes that can unlock the current evaluation debate. This specific opinion re-appears throughout the interviews. For instance, the Swedish PR industry should develop a standard:

> I very much believe it is on the industry itself, and that standards or routines must be developed to say, *"This is how we do it".* In some aspects, PR is still a grey area and protected activity, and, there is not much co-ordination. The general frameworks are not that precise concerning what you do.
> *Interviewee C*

In addition, comparable evaluation standards would make the daily-work of a PR consultant "very much easier" (I:E). This because the existing tools for collecting data are "very clumsy (I:L). Interestingly, two practitioners stand out from these

viewpoints. On one side, interviewee N believe standards would "work for a while, but then they would be outdated pretty fast". On the other side, interviewee M sense that a common interest is more important:

> The entire industry can get better, but then, it is the industry. It cannot be that only consultant agencies should deliver; it must grow from the other way around as well. […] I believe you will be on the wrong path saying, *"Ah, now we will develop an industry standard".* Instead, it is about understanding. To actually become interested together.

Theme 5: The Client

Many of the practitioners recognise that clients do not have an interest in buying evaluation that requires advanced research techniques. Hence, clients do not "demand methodological follow-ups" (I:A). Clients moreover rarely ask for anything else than outreach reports:

> […] clients want to spend their money on action—they gladly want a report, but they are not willing to allocate money before, or after, to pay for reports that requires much work and time […] We can say *"These are the clips that we got, here and here are the links. It will take time, energy and money to extract data from this".* And those things maybe we, and above all, the client, want to put on outgoing activities.
> *Interviewee L*

To give a further illustration of this, let's look at two other quotes:

> In the most recent offers, I cannot really remember if it says *"… and then we evaluate".* If it would exist, I am sure that we would divide the work in three phases in the budget. Working with insights costs this much, actual units costs this much, and evaluation costs this much. I am sure the client then would take away the last part of those three.
> *Interviewee B*

[interest] can exist, but not among everyone […] When you start to work with large corporates, you realise they live in a world of their own. They do not give a damn about how things turns out. They just want to advance within the company… higher up in a ladder of hierarchy.
Interviewee J

In addition, some interviewed practitioners agree that the clients' experience of buying could have an effect on the evaluation techniques. It is also easier to satisfy a client that has never purchased PR before. According to interviewee P, "you need to keep in keep in mind that the matureness among clients are not as extensive as, perhaps, we would like, or hope for". Interviewee L similar claim that "sometimes, the client has a pretty bad understanding […] *It would be nice if we get some clips and exposure for our initiative"* and then they are rather happy about this since they are sometimes bad at buying PR". One key to remember according to the empirical material is that "the bar to get out—to get things into earned media is higher than many clients believe" (I:D). One practitioner, however, stand out from these attitude as he believes clients are "tired of hearing about of hearing about fictive numbers". Clients indeed are mature enough to buy PR services (I:H).

Evaluation as internal justification for the client

One of the most noticeable patterns in the empirical material is that the interviewed practitioners believe clients are under pressure to deliver PR results to top-management. Interviewee B remembers a situation when this became very obvious:

Then you realise that its only about defending its activity internally […] So then it became: *"I have said my opinion, but it will be totally false* […] *This is really alternative fact. It's not right".* Therefore, you cannot forget that you sometimes work with clients that internally must show itself in different ways. You can only give your recommendation. However, it is nothing I would put my name on or publish on our website. Because it is not true.

Similarly, interviewee O, new to the PR industry, often find that clients want to deliver great results higher up in the organisation or company. "And then, they probably do not care—they perhaps shut their eyes for things that are not that fantastic. It is no guarantee that they know how we measure […] it basically sounds nice with 70 million", she said. A final example is interviewee J who must deliver visible results for clients. "Although they are buying PR services, they still want it to end up in very visual clips", she said.

Uncertainty and fear living of not living up to previous results

A perspective that re-emerges in the empirical material is that the interviewed consultants must live up to previous PR results from when the client used another communication agency. Although the consultant might not agree with the former agency's research techniques, she/he must use them to look equally good and to get some comparison:

> In this case, it became obvious as the client already had something to evaluate. Then, we consequently set a bar that we of course had to reach, to give them just as much *"bang for the buck"* […] When you measure […] you can choose to do it either more positive or negative, depending on how you want to present it. We then discovered that the other agency, in many ways, had calculated too optimistically.
> *Interviewee L*

Others speak about the fear of not living up to previous results:

> If you were to do this before and after-measurement about how people think about the brand or about awareness, and end up noticing *"Well, this didn't really make any difference";* then of course it is easier just to give a rough estimate to make it look better […] and if you get a new client that earlier have reach 90 billion, then, our 90 million is not that much to boast about.
> *Interviewee O*

I have worked with clients used to PR-value, and they want results to be measured over time in this way […] and if I would suddenly change this for this specific client […] it will appear as I have made a bad job. This is not true; instead, it can actually be better. Depending on the client and previous relations, there are different possibilities to make changes.
Interviewee G

Complying with client demands

Some of the interviewed consultants experience moments when they are torn between the evaluation techniques they believe make sense, and other basic methods that client demands. A quote by interviewee F illustrate this:

Many times, it can be especially hard to counterbalance this; what the client want towards […] what we actually would want and could do. We have had these discussions. However, at the same time, as long as the client is happy, we very often leave it to be.

In line with complying with client demands, several interviewees feel that it is important to make the client satisfied:

Everything goes back to making the client satisfied no matter the price. If that means that we must multiply it [advertising cost] with seven or whatever […] to increase a client's reach, we will do it. […] Everything then becomes: *"Well, well. It was good because the client became happy, but it doesn't visualise anything real".*
Interviewee O

Primarily, think client. As long as they are happy. You can of course always get better and more effective, but it meanwhile often exists … certain conditions that you cannot look past. So yes, that is the way it has been […] what we believe the client want is the starting point.
Interviewee E

Interviewee M furthermore feel that consultants are, in fact, egocentric if they do not prioritise clients:

> My mission is to make my client a hero. If the manager to this person do not care about long-term effects, then it is sadly like this. If it still goes well for this person, then I must be happy. It is still my focus. Unfortunately, my ego, what I believe is interesting, always comes second. You should not work as a consultant if you must get your ego satisfied.

Theme 6: The Consultant

The combined material show that the interviewed practitioners are aware that their own interest and attitudes might influence their evaluation practices. For instance:

> In relation to everything else, I do not believe it becomes prioritised and then, you are happy with the way it is. Because the other alternative is to change and act on those discussions, it becomes too difficult. […] not even all of us here at the agency could settle on how to measure and calculate reach.
>
> *Interviewee O*

In addition, evaluation is sometimes handed over to other colleagues. Interviewee I, working at a full-service agency, explain that the project leaders are responsible for evaluating projects, although they do not work in PR. As an outcome, the interviewee "rather continue working and does something else". Another viewpoint is that it can "feel boring to spend more money, or allocate money, that could be used to create opportunities for things to grow, rather than on cleaning up" (I:L). Not only does this quote tell us that evaluation is unwanted, it also shows that evaluation is done for formative purposes. A quote made by interviewee C tells a similar story:

> I believe it is a helluva bunch of factors. It is probably fear, lack of knowledge, money, time. […] Laziness, you name it. […] I could almost develop it myself, but it would require a darn lot of hours to build our

own system of evaluation. […] Let us say that we do the market survey in the end of a campaign, and it will cost 30-40 percent of the budget. It is not fun for us to allocate money for that. Although, it would ultimately be better. We would come across as more serious, proficient and competent.

The last citation shows the opinion that evaluation can make the agency appear professional—like a sign of qualification" (I:M). Interestingly, this perspective is shared with half of the interviewees. To illustrate two examples of this:

I perceive that it is problematic not having better answers. That you would like to say that we have a detailed plan on how we work in a process. Regarding on how we approach a client, from how to write a brief to actually delivering an unit. […] So, it almost feels unprofessional that we do not have a system for evaluation.
Interviewee B

If I was on same side as the client […] I would from the start try to have a third-party; such as an impartial measuring agency or someone that will review 1) whether the results actually are what they appear to be, and 2), is it that bad or good? […] It is hard to trust the defence attorney to be objective towards the results.
Interviewee L

Interviewee J furthermore feel that evaluation brings a layer of trustworthiness. "For me, it's obvious. If I had a brand, I would of course want to get it evaluated and know the results. If I am going to spend money", she said. Improved evaluation techniques could hence verify that an agency can score high on specific aspects. This means that if a client "want to work with us, it will cost you money" (I:A).

The consultants level of knowledge

The interviewed practitioners often see that their own research skills have an impact on their evaluation practices. PR consultants, for instance, might not be "academics

or statistical skilled, and do not know how to do it" (I:A). Similarly, interviewee B believes it exists "a lack of knowledge […] there is already a lot of established methods but we are not aware of them. So, we do not have it as routines at our agency". Many of the interviewed consultants instead use the most recognised ways to evaluate since they do not know any other methods. In other words: "You still do not know how to really measure a PR-campaign. You do not know how to measure the engagement in a good way, and therefore, you have always used simple measures" (I:N). To give a further illustration of this:

> We are still rather okay with how things are in the industry in general—
> that you are doing as good as you can to make it work and look good for
> now […] but you don't know how to really do something different.
> *Interviewee O*

> [long term effects] You do not really know how to measure it, to be hon-
> est. I do not think one knows what the best technique is, and I do not
> know the answer with full confidence either […] I believe it is plenty of
> absent knowledge.
> *Interviewee C.*

The consultants' ability to pitch advanced evaluation to the client

A third of the interviewed practitioners believes it is the consultants responsibility to have enough knowledge to educate their clients in PR evaluation. Also, if the consultant was better skilled in how to evaluate, they could be able to sell it to the client:

> I feel that the agency holds a great responsibility to explain for the client
> and to get the client to understand […] we need to explain to the clients,
> and get smarter within—what is it that really counts. To put more focus
> on quality and impact […] also, it exists very few clients that considers
> it fun or choose to assign money on this [evaluation], and it is something
> we are bad on pitching to the client.
> *Interviewee O*

I believe we must improve our skills to sell the part [evaluation] to the client. To convince the client that this part is also very important. I believe evaluation very often is forgotten—because the client is not asking for it.

Interviewee B

I believe it is important to be convincing […] we have a responsibility to educate them [clients] and we have an obligation to learn more as advisors. […] I think this in-between-measurement is essential to be professional, just to see how things actually are proceeding.

Interviewee P

Fear among consultants

The last pattern throughout the interviews is fear—a third of the consultants believe this might be preventing them of undertaking further evaluation. For instance:

If you always did a pre-measurement after a campaign, it would had caused a major pressure if the client was not satisfied […] I believe that one is rather afraid. If all other agencies measure reach or claim they have reached 1 500 000 billion (or similar), we subsequently do not want to argue that we did an exceptionally successful campaign by only reaching 1 million, although it is more … reasonable.

Interviewee O

There is always some fear that evaluation is going to lead to something— basically bad results. That you have done a bad job. […] Bad results often lead to an uncomfortable evaluation. Alternatively, a withdrawn budget next year, that you are not allowed to continue the job and that you/…/ realise that you might have done mistakes in some aspects and should have allocated the money on other things instead.

Consultant H

For some practitioners, it is most important to evaluate when things go well. However, it always "exist a fear that things might not go as planned" (I:B). Similarly, interviewee C feel that PR in many ways is an uncertain tool. "It can end up bloody good or damn bad. You never have control or own what you do in any way. I believe that people are rather afraid to also measure it". In conclusion to this theme, and this chapter, interviewee G bring up client expecations:

> [fear] that you do not live up to client expectations. […] You are often rather afraid of evaluation. *"Oh crap, this can strike back"* or "*This can become inconvenient if things do not look great"* […] we are good at evaluating, but it is also a strategy to keep a line of retreat open. Especially in social media. In that case, you are glad there are numbers.

Analysis and Discussion

Practitioners perceptions of the state of the art

The purpose of this thesis is to explore evaluation practises among Swedish PR consultants and contribute to the long-standing evaluation debate. In line with this goal, the first research question seeks to understand how Swedish PR consultants make sense of evaluation as part of their working life. Laskin (2016) suggests that PR should be evaluated on five levels—output, outreach, outcomes, outgrowth and outperform. The results of this research, however, tell a different story. The participants rarely considered the last three levels. Some even suggest that it is impossible to link PR-activities to business results. This contradicts the idea that it is essential for PR practitioners to describe how their efforts contribute to bottom-line results (CIPR, 2016, Lindenmann, 2003; Likely & Watson, 2013: Pohl, 2009, Volk, 2016). Macnamara (2014) argues that the cognitive effects of PR activities, such as attitudes and beliefs, change over time and require research methods such as advanced qualitative approaches and longitudinal interview-studies. Remarkably enough, the findings do not indicate usage of such approaches. This can be interpreted as an overreliance on immediate results, rather than on impacts on publics. In other words, success is not measured against the actual impacts that published material might have; it is merely the media coverage that practitioners have acquired (Watson, 2005). According to Lee, Sha, Dozier and Sargent (2015), a PR practitioner in the role of a communication manager takes part of strategic discussions, including decision-making processes in the organisation. To do so, she/he must use research to measure efforts made and to improve future decisions. By contrast, a communication technician merely produces and spreads information based on what clients or top-management consider important. With this in mind, PR consultants that perceive their work as done after gaining free publicity might be restricted to the role as communication technicians (Macnamara, 1997). Based on the results, some interviewed consultants might be stuck in the role of communication technicians.

Secondly, the findings suggest that many practitioners do not have specific evaluation routines, such as templates or systematic approaches. Comparable standards rarely appear to exist for different projects, clients or consultants at the same agency, although evaluation is perceived as important among the interviewed practitioners. This finding expands existing research that has verified that evaluation practise and improved methods for measuring are viewed as essential by PR practitioners (Simmons & Watson, 2004), but that the actual use of more sophisticated methods remains limited (Kabucua, Oriaso & Kiambati, 2016).

When going back to the conceptual framework of the thesis, especially the importance of setting measurable PR objectives, one can argue that these objectives are the core of effective evaluation (Watson & Noble, 2007). Not only does the current research show that measurable objectives sometimes are non-existent, but when they exist, objectives are rarely connected with long-term goals and mainly limited to media measurers. This means that practitioners could overlook obstacles that might reduce the success of a PR campaign, such as dissonance among publics (McCoy & Hargie, 2003). Having said that, adjusting to objectives so they fit the situation is part of the best practice presented in the thesis conceptual framework. It is nonetheless problematic when objectives are mainly restricted to outreach, are vague and not linked to long term goals.

Comparisons to best practice in PR evaluation

The results of this study do not fully support best practises presented in chapter three. For instance, Michaelson and Macleod (2007) argue that evaluation should always include rigorous research designs that meet the highest standards of research methods. The present findings, however, imply something different. In contrast to best practises, research methods are often basic and far from existing standards. For instance, results sometimes ends up being "alternative facts". To get an illustration of what this means, AVEs are often used among the interviewees. Based on the results, we moreover see that the current evaluation practises among Swedish PR consultants support Michaelson and Macleod's (2007) fifth and third area. The evaluation techniques are often cost effective, and insights are sometimes used to develop future communication programmes. Additionally, the study's findings suggest that PR consultants overlook guidelines given by professional PR associations

such as the Barcelona Principles. Macnamara (2015) and Laskin (2009) have argued that the PR field has collected an immense amount of normative concepts without practitioners following the lead, although they would like to. All things considered, the current research implies that this might be the case in this situation as well. Besides, the state of the art appears to not provide many possibilities for making analytical judgements necessary for improving communication results and to achieve best practice.

What influences the evaluation practises?

The second research question attempts to understand the underlying causes of the state of the art in Sweden. That is, what influences the PR practitioners in their evaluation approaches? The thesis' second chapter stated that PR practitioners frequently identify lack of time, money and knowledge as main barriers to evaluation methods that require advanced research methods. Based on the current results, we can conclude that PR consultants are experiencing similar obstacles. However, the interviewees also described other influences, presented in the remaining part of this chapter.

Influence: Personal characteristics

Research on attitudes among PR practitioners has shown that evaluation is simply a torment for many practitioners as they do not have enough research skills (Simmons and Watson, 2004). More precisely, the findings of this study show signs of individual influences inherent of the PR practitioner him/herself, such as personal motivation, fear, confidence, and learnings. Actions is not taken although many express a will to become better at evaluation. Furthermore, the findings suggest that practitioners are influenced by the fact that they do not know how to convince clients to buy advanced evaluation; this might also indicate low confidence. This finding supports results from a recent survey by Zerfass, Verčič and Volk (2017) on the state of the art in PR evaluation in Europe. Another key aspect is that the findings indicate that the consultants are restricted by their personal attitudes on evaluation. An example is that evaluation sometimes is treated as an unnecessary task. One interviewee stressed that it is "not fun" and that money is spent on "actions" rather

than on "cleaning up". Others stated that evaluation would not be given priority even if budgets would increase.

The thesis' review of previous research revealed that PR scholars and professionals have been on a never ending quest for a silver bullet that will enlighten the PR evaluation practise of today (such as L'Etang, 2008 and Gregory & Watson, 2008). Not only does the current research suggest that many participants are holding the Swedish PR accountable for developing their evaluation practises, but they are also waiting for the solution to appear automatically. From this we assume that the power to make a change is not viewed to reside with individual practitioners, but with the industry. The emphasis on waiting on a magical solution together with limited measurement techniques, might lead to negative effects, such as distancing PR practitioners from strategic standpoints (Likely & Watson, 2013). The main argument is that practitioners and management should stop viewing evaluation as a summative purpose and start to acknowledge its full potential to break out of the current deadlock in PR evaluation (Macnamara, 2015) All together, the findings show signs that PR experts in Sweden could be paying lip service to evaluation (Xavier, Patel & Johnston, 2004). The meaning of the term *lip service* is that "you agree with something but do nothing to support it" (Cambridge Dictionary). Such personal influences should be taken into account in future discussions on obstacles into PR evaluation.

Influence: Status of PR

One of the strongest statements that can be made based on the results, is that PR consultants might be under the influence of the clients' preconditions, such as organisational culture. This is in line with Thorson et al. (2015) who suggest that organisational culture is more important than overall budget when it comes to implementing standards in PR evaluation and measurement. In this case, implications for practise are that a PR consultant must consider the client' need to defend her/himself in front of top-management for buying the service. Yin, Krishnan and Ean (2012) similarly observed that the current business environment puts more pressure on PR managers to prove the value of their programmes and activities in measurable terms. Furthermore, organisational influences on clients could be a reason why PR consultants use rudimentary evaluation methods, although they do not

necessarily agree that these show the true value of their efforts. This finding supplements Seaman and Reines' study from 2010, which found a gap between perceived effectiveness and the actual use of more sophisticated tools for analysis among European PR practitioners. The results moreover suggest similarities to Laborde and Pompper (2006) thoughts: Professionals are driven by methods that can generate fast results, are cost-effective and give maximum data. In other words, Swedish PR consultants experience a similar pressure as their international colleagues because they are under the pressure to stick to the given budget.

What do this tell us? It might be the case that PR have a low societal status, especially among top-management who cannot see the value beyond immediate results. PR might also be viewed as cheap in comparison to nearby disciplines and evaluation then becomes expensive in relation to what is put in. Although PR is an occupation that cares about long-lasting relationship and not only instant results (PRSA, 2012), the consultants in this situation are under the pressure to deliver just as many visible results as marketing or advertising. The situation is paradoxical as an increased budget is not necessary as long as the PR agency scores just as high (or low) as previous results, and as long as long-term goals are not set. This boils down to PR practitioners still reaching for the promised land of respect twenty years after Heirs remark on measurable objectives as a golden bridge to enhanced respectably and resources.

Influence: Uncertainty and false expectations

Not only does the interpretation of findings suggest that some practitioners are under the influence of PR's uncertainty, but it also appears that personal fear exists concerning poor evaluation results. This means that better but more elaborate evaluation methods are avoided, although they could determine the effectiveness of PR campaigns or programs (Watson & Noble, 2007, p. 22). For instance, evaluation is practiced when tings "go very well"—as expressed by one interviewee. The uncertainty and fear seems to be strongly connected with living up to results delivered by other agencies. One practitioner, for instance, uses questionable methods to give just as much "bang for the buck". Interestingly, the review over previous literature did not identify any contributions on how communication agencies pressuring each

other in the evaluation stasis. Based on this, I see a strong value of this result: Swedish PR consultants appear to be caught in a cogwheel of expectations where the bearings are collectively oiled with unrealistic results between agencies. An implication for practise is that consultants might not agree with the research methods, nor the actual results, but use them to be equally convincing.

Motivation: Professionalism

The thesis' conceptual framework suggests that PR practitioners with professional aspirations must show eagerness, creativeness and use curiosity to grasp opportunities that could help improve their skills in the profession. The findings of the current research do however not support VanZandt's (1990) five areas of professionalism. First, the interviewed practitioners do not pursue the quality and ideals in the theoretical base of best practises in PR evaluation. Second, they do not relate on a personal high standard of competence in providing evaluation as a service to their clients. Although the consultants show great willingness to improve their evaluation practises, the actual state of the art is very much client-controlled.

When it comes to sense of pride in the occupation, different views are clear in the findings. For some participants, pride results from making the client happy no matter the price. Satisfying clients is usually done by providing visible material that can be used to protect them against organisational influences. This notion supports the idea that professionalism should be more about client's rights than dependency (Eraut, 1994). Meanwhile, Bloland and Tempel (2004) stress that trust is essential in professions. This means that clients should trust PR consultants to be experts and valuing their advices. In this case, findings suggest that clients sometimes are disregarding evaluation advice given by the interviewed participants.

From this we can see that the current results are not congruent with the ideas of Brante (2014) who argues that true professions are characterised by autonomy, legitimacy and authority. Findings also imply that several consultants experience low sense of pride as their evaluation research might result in "alternative facts" they are not proud of. However, increased trust in PR practitioners among clients would increase the overall legitimacy of the occupation, which is an important signature of true professions (Brante, 2014). What is also important, professionals are experts ready to be held accountable for the activities they are performing and they produce

new methods for handling challenging settings (Niemann-Struweg, Meintjes, 2008). Then again, not all practitioners in the study take responsibility for their evaluation results. The current research is therefore similar to findings by Struweg and Meintjes (2008) who established that practitioners emphasise the signification of professionalism, while claiming that it is not their responsibility to make necessary changes.

Challenging existing perspectives

On the whole, it seems highly reasonable to assume that the current state of the art in PR evaluation in Sweden is not very complex when it comes to methods and techniques. However, the underlying dynamics are multifaceted—some go beyond orthodox answers previously specified by the literature. Based on the results in this study, we see possible pathways of influence responsible for the discrepancy in the gap between theoretical best practises in PR evaluation and their actual implementation (figure 1, p. 50).

As stated earlier in the introduction of the thesis, the PR industry has been on a constant quest of finding its true identity. For instance, one focus has been to develop a "relationship identity" that could "enlighten public relations research and even improve the practice" (Coombs & Holladay, 2015, p. 689). Another ambition has been to develop the practise into a profession. One of the main suggestions that can be made, based on the findings, is that PR consultants are operating in a discourse of a discipline continuously "becoming" something greater. It is a state of not being there yet. For instance, many interviewees argue that their evaluation practise could be better for some reason. However, many do not see that this has something to do with them personally, nor do they act out on possible ambitions. Although academia and experts continue to produce standards, toolkits and white papers, PR specialists appears to be unable to implement these ideas. Best practises in PR evaluation seem to be too far from what is possible in real life. In other words, there is a strong discrepancy between doing the right thing according to normative theory, and doing what the occupational role requires. After all, what possibilities do single PR practitioners actually have to gain a professional status if the current
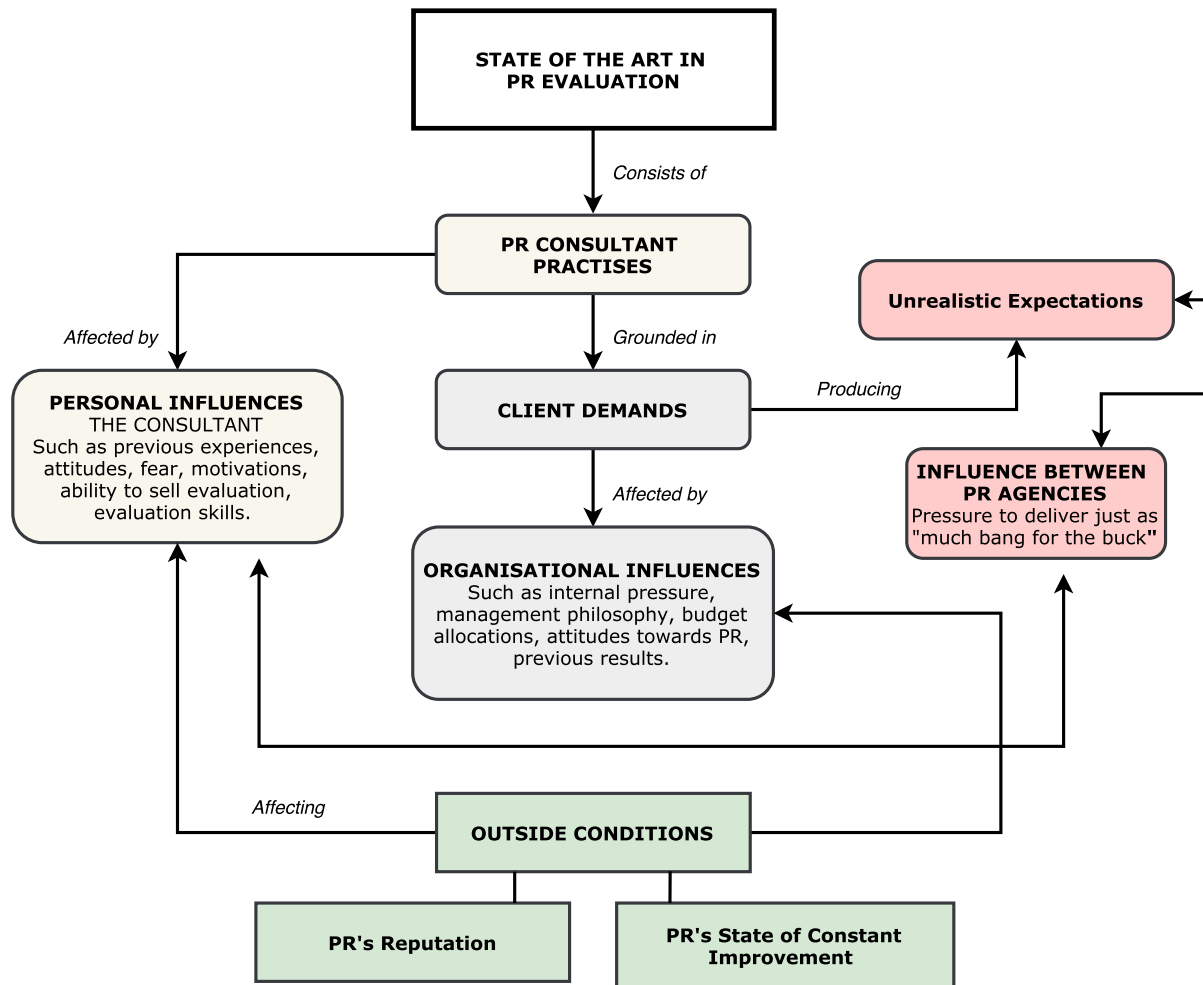
Figure 1. Possible pathways of influences.

standards are not realistic? In contrast to what Stacks and Michaelson (2011) suggest are misunderstandings regarding the current standards among public relations professionals and academics, the current research implies that practitioners are aware of the weaknesses and strengths of their evaluation practises.

Finally, although it is impossible to grasp all underlying dynamics behind the situation, it is important to attempt to challenge existing perspectives. Trying to understand a phenomenon before applying normative standards might be more productive than formulating premature recommendations. To put it another way, let us shorten the gap between what *should* done, what actually *can* be done, and what *wants* to be done by PR experts.

Conclusions

The purpose of this master thesis has been to provide insight into the state of the art in PR evaluation in Sweden based on the experiences of 15 PR consultants. Not only has it aimed to understand in what ways PR is evaluated, but it has also attempted to grasp what might influence the state of the art. As the thesis has been completed with qualitative methods, the research and its results should only be viewed as glimpses of insights into the current situation and not as definite answers. The thesis, however, contributes to the evaluation debate by adding to our understanding of the opportunities and barriers these consultants encounter when proving the value of their work trough evaluation.

One key conclusion is that PR consultants perform evaluation measures merely to the degree the client demands, although this often involves very basic research methods. The evaluation consequently remains limited to rudimentary research methods and without systematic approaches.

Another key conclusion are possible pathways of influence responsible for the discrepancy between the theoretical best practises in PR evaluation and their actual implementation (see figure 1, p. 50. For instance, we see that consultants might be influenced by the state of PR (such as its poor reputation), the client's organisational culture, and her/his own personality. Overall, the findings implicate that PR agencies create a loop of pressure among each other by using unreliable evaluation methods. Ultimately, there is a strong anomaly between doing the right thing according to normative theory in PR evaluation, and doing what the occupational role requires according to the interviewed consultants.

Limitations, implications and future recommendations

The results of the thesis demonstrate a complex situation in an increasingly difficult business environment. Currently, the power to decide on what becomes evaluated resides with the client. This means that PR practitioners might experience that their efforts are meaningless and not fully acknowledged. Future recommendation for

practice is therefore to use evaluation as a strategy for attaining professional integrity. By doing so, individual practitioners have the potential to earn professional attributes such has autonomy, legitimacy, and authority (Brante, 2014). Furthermore, agencies must stop putting unrealistic pressure on each other. To break out of this circle, PR consultants must initiate further discussions with their clients, and together reach an agreement on what should be evaluated.

Furthermore, the purpose of the study has not been to illustrate correlations between variables, and it does not have the authority to verify possible ones. But based on the results, I suggest that there might be possible paths of influences that PR practitioners encounter in their evaluation practises. As these influences has not yet been well examined, future research should validate their significance - preferably by using quantitative methods. Although interviews generate in-depth material with many different perspectives, it has limitations. In this case, the empirical material has been restricted to a small sample. Concerning interviews, Alvesson and Sveningsson stress that "we think we know, or we want to give the impression that we know. But often we do not" (as cited in Falkheimer, Heide, Simonsson, Zerfass & Verhoeven, 2016, p. 23). Consequently, we often need further research to validate ideas born in qualitative research. For upcoming studies, it is also important to note that this thesis has been limited to agency settings. Therefore, it would be of value to include experiences in other environments, such as PR practioners working in-house, non-profit, in organisations or at companies.

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Appendices

Appendix A: The Interviewees

PR Consultant	Years of Experience	Agency Size *Number of Employees Small: 1-10 Medium: 11-50 Large: 50+*	Type of Agency	Part of International Network
A	**20**	**Small**	**PR Agency**	**No**
B	5	Large	Advertising Agency	No
C	**5**	**Small**	**PR-agency**	**No**
D	14	Large	Advertising Agency	Yes
E	**20**	**Small**	**PR Agency**	**No**
F*	0	Small	PR Agency	No
G	**3,5**	**Large**	**Advertising and PR agency**	**No**
H	3	Large	Advertising and PR Agency	No
I	**5**	**Large**	**Full-service agency**	**No**
J	5	Medium	PR Agency	Yes
K	**3**	**Medium**	**PR Agency**	**No**
L	13	Medium	Communication Agency	No
M	**3,5**	**Medium**	**Communication Agency**	**Yes**
N	8	Medium	Communications Marketing Agency	Yes

O	**1,5**	**Medium**	**Communications Marketing Agency**	**Yes**
P	20	Medium	PR Agency	No

*Colleague to interviewee E, did not participate until the end of the interview.

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Information	Berätta syftet med studien, att deltagande är frivilligt och kan avslutas när som helst utan att en förklarning måste ges, klargör att intervjupersonen är anonym, att intervjun kommer att spelas in och sedan tran-skriberas.	*Personliga anteckningar*
Tema: Inledande	Vad är din ålder? Vad gjorde du innan du kom hit? Hur länge har du arbetat in branschen? Vad är din roll här på byrån?	
Tema: Rutiner och dagligt utövande	Om du tänker på ditt senaste projekt eller kampanj, hur såg utvärderingen av PR ut?	*Förklara vad som menas med PR ut-värdering.*
Uppföljande	Fanns det en ordning för hur du utvärderade? Hur gjordes utvärderingen i projektets olika stadier? Hur används informationen? Vilka metoder användes? Vad var det som utvärderades Hur dokumenterade du infor-mationen? Vem hade ansvaret för utvärderingen? Hur speglar utvärder-ingen ditt arbete inför kund?	*Säkerställ svaren.* *Så i detta projektet ut-värderade du X bild… är detta vad du van-ligtvis vad du gör? Om inte, vad är det du vanligtvis gör? Är rutinerna samma för andra projekt?*
Tema: Målsättning	Jag skulle vilja gå vidare och prata lite om att sätta mål. Kan du tänka på ett projekt eller kampanj där du arbetade med att sätta mål och kopplade detta med utvärdering? Tex sätta mål för räckvidd, antal klipp, långsiktiga effekter.	
Uppföljande	Är det något som du vanligen gör? När du satte målen, tog du hänsyn till kundens existerande verksamhet?	*Säkerställ svaren. Så i detta projektet satte du (långsik-tiga/kortsiktiga) mål… är detta vad du van-ligtvis vad du gör?*

	Hur speglar dessa målen din insats framför kund?	*Om inte, vad är det du vanligtvis gör? Använder du samma metoder att sätta mål för andra projekt?*
Tema: Barriärer och motivaton	Forskningen idag visar att personer som arbetar med PR inte alltid använder utvärdering i den utsträckning som man kunnat göra. Man använder ganska enkla tekniker, som att räkna pressklipp och presentera stora mängder data, istället för att använda avancerade metoder som till exempel att mäta långsiktiga effekter. Så jag undrar om du kan ge exempel om det finns ett projekt/ kampanj när du inte har utvärderat PR särskilt mycket?	
Uppföljande	Vilka var anledningarna tror du varför du inte gjorde mer utvärdering? Hur var denna utvärdering i jämförelse till vad du vanligtvis gör? Hur påverkade pengar, tid, budget? Hade det något med att göra hur kunden nöjer sig med det som ges idag? Hade det något att göra med att PR-proffs nöjer sig/skyddar sig? Hade det något med att göra hur kunden såg på PR… Hur vi övertalar kunden att använda budgeten till annan utvärdering.. Din egna kunskap.. Tillgången till standarder och principer..	
Avslutande	Nu tänkte jag börja avrunda… vi har X minuter kvar och jag ser gärna att vi tar dom till att du får utveckla tankar om du känner för det.. har jag missat något?	