Historically, public relations research has been dominated by organisational interests, treating the profession as a function to help organisations achieve their goals, and focusing on practice and processes first and foremost. Such research is valuable in addressing how public relations can be used more effectively by organisations and institutions, but has tended to neglect the consequences of the practice on the social world in which those organisations operate.

This edited collection adds momentum to the emergent interest in the relationship between public relations, society and culture by bringing together a wide range of alternative theoretical and methodological approaches including anthropology, storytelling, pragmatism and Latin American studies. The chapters draw on insights from a variety of disciplines including sociology, cultural studies, post-colonialism, political economy, ecological studies, feminism and critical race theory. Empirical contributions illustrate theoretical arguments with narratives and interview extracts from practitioners, resulting in an engaging text that will provide inspiration for scholars and students to explore public relations in new ways.

*Public Relations, Society and Culture* makes an essential contribution to a range of scholarly fields and illustrates the relevance of public relations to matters beyond its organisational function. It will be highly useful to students and scholars of public relations as well as cultural studies, ethnicity/race and communication, media studies, development communication, anthropology, and organisational communication. This insightful book will make a significant contribution to debates about the purpose and practice of public relations in the new century.

**Lee Edwards** is lecturer in Corporate Communications and PR at Manchester Business School based at the University of Manchester. Her main research interests revolve around sociological understandings of PR and include the operation of power in and through PR, ‘race’ and PR, PR as a cultural intermediary, and PR in the context of globalisation. She is a member of the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, and has contributed to a number of books including *The SAGE Handbook of Public Relations* (2010) and *Public Relations in Global Cultural Contexts* (2011).

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Public Relations, Society and Culture

Theoretical and Empirical Explorations

Edited by
Lee Edwards and Caroline E. M. Hodges
For Bob

Lee Edwards

For all who inspired me during my travels in Latin America

Caroline E. M. Hodges
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INTRODUCTION

Implications of a (radical) socio-cultural ‘turn’ in public relations scholarship

Lee Edwards and Caroline E. M. Hodges

The increasing prevalence of research taking a different path from the functional, normative approach that has historically dominated public relations scholarship suggests something of a socio-cultural ‘turn’ in the field. However, with the exception of some excellent book-length contributions (e.g. L’Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Mickey, 2002; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Moloney, 2006), such work is often disparate and can be difficult for interested scholars to find. Our aim in this book is to add momentum to the emergent ‘turn’ by bringing together in one location a range of alternative theoretical and methodological approaches that can contribute to a socio-cultural view of public relations.

The book not only introduces scholars and students to new perspectives on public relations; it also opens up avenues for further exploration by experienced colleagues and new researchers alike. The rich theoretical and methodological traditions on which the authors draw, from anthropology and storytelling to Latin American studies and pragmatism, make up a tapestry of inspiration, the intricacies of which we hope to see explored over the coming years.

This introduction puts the following chapters in context and explains the value they offer in socio-cultural terms. We explain briefly normative understandings of public relations, and their legacy in terms of scholarship and practice. In light of this, we argue why a (radical) socio-cultural understanding of public relations is both necessary and advantageous in building knowledge of the profession and enriching scholarship.

Public relations: the normative view

Historically, public relations research has been driven by organisational interests, treating the profession as an organisational function first and foremost. The view is exemplified in the work of James Grunig and his colleagues in the United States of
America; Grunig was one of the first scholars to formally theorise public relations and consolidate his thoughts in textbook form (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The book is still referenced by students and lecturers today, such is its impact on the field. In it, the authors set out the parameters for public relations in organisations and proposed four basic models of public relations: press agentry; propaganda; two-way asymmetric; and two-way symmetric communication. Based on their own research, the authors suggested that these models were the four main ways in which companies practiced communication with their publics.

Building on this work, Grunig and his colleagues developed the Excellence model of public relations on the basis of an international study of PR practice. The results were first published in 1992 and have provided the backbone for most scholarship investigating public relations practice as a tool for sustaining and supporting the organisations where it is employed (Grunig, 1992). Research in this area examines, among other things, what kinds of tasks constitute public relations (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Gregory, 2008), how practitioners should work within organisations in order to exercise the greatest influence (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 2000), the nature of the relationships managed by PR practitioners (Ledingham, 2006; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), and the ways in which organisations can deal with problematic audiences to manage issues and avoid crises (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006; Livesey, 2001). Studies tend to be executed using methods that test the principles of the ‘Excellence’ framework proposed by Grunig and provide a broad understanding of trends in practice (L’Etang, 2005; Aldoory, 2005).

Functional research is valuable in addressing how public relations practitioners can carry out their roles more effectively from the perspective of the organisation. Indeed, we cannot understand public relations as a practice without knowing what that practice consists of in broad terms. However, this singular focus on public relations in organisations has tended to exclude the social world in which those organisations operate. Public relations itself is a social and cultural practice, a profession with its own dynamics that generates discourses in order to shape our attitudes, values and beliefs in the interests of organisations. As the following quote illustrates, the Grunigian approach to public relations only examines one side of this equation – the degree to which the organisation is served – rather than providing a more balanced view of the profession that incorporates its wider effects.

Public relations contributes to organisational effectiveness when it helps reconcile the organisation’s goals with the expectations of its strategic constituencies. This contribution has monetary value to the organisation. Public relations contributes to effectiveness by building quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies. Public relations is most likely to contribute to effectiveness when the senior public relations manager is a member of the dominant coalition where he or she is able to shape the organization’s goals and to help determine which external publics are most strategic.

(Grunig, 1992: 86)
This approach has a number of drawbacks: it frames public relations in a way that excludes the interests of increasingly diverse audiences; it ignores the dynamics produced by the profession pursuing its own interests; and it does not address the role that public relations plays as a discursive force in society, shaping social and cultural values and beliefs in order to legitimise certain interests over others (Edwards, 2009b; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Motion & Weaver, 2005).

**Alternative perspectives: A socio-cultural ‘turn’ in public relations scholarship**

Over the past decade, normative understandings of public relations have been enhanced and challenged by a gradual increase in the number of PR scholars drawing on sociological and cultural theorists to examine research problems. We argue that this work constitutes a ‘turn’ in public relations theory that shifts the ontological and epistemological focus of the field towards the socially constructed nature of practice, process and outcomes. Simpson (2009: 1330) defines a ‘turn’ as a movement of thought that ‘opens up new intellectual frontiers, invites new ways of seeing and suggests new questions to be answered. It demands the rigorous contestation of ideas and a deep probing of the philosophical assumptions that shape our intellectual discourses’.

In this theoretical turn, public relations moves from being understood as a functional process enacted in the organisational context to being a contingent, socio-cultural activity that forms part of the communicative process by which society constructs its symbolic and material ‘reality’ (Daymon & Hodges, 2009). Drawing on the definition of culture from the cultural anthropologist and ethnographer, Clifford Geertz (1973: 89), culture is viewed here as an ‘historically transmitted pattern of meanings’ (symbolic and linguistic) by which we (as human beings) communicate, develop and transform our knowledge about and attitudes towards life. We understand public relations to be fundamentally about producing, sustaining and regulating such meanings. Consequently, each case of public relations will be unique, formed through the beliefs, values and attitudes that shape the context in which it unfolds, and structured by different configurations of social, economic and political factors (Hodges, 2006; Curtin & Gaither, 2005).

Traditionally, socio-cultural work in any field can draw on a vast range of disciplines: sociology, cultural studies, post-colonial scholarship, post-structural work, political economy, ecological studies, feminism, queer studies and more. In public relations, scholars have begun to look at the position of the profession in society: Kevin Moloney (2006, 1996) has written extensively about the uncomfortable relationship between public relations and civil society, while Maureen Taylor (2000) has considered public relations expertise in relationship building and its influence in establishing democracy. Others have argued for the importance of public relations as a discipline that fundamentally changes the way in which society functions and have explored its potential to take more of an active role in bringing about change (Peruzzo, 1993; Molleda et al., 2003; Molleda & Ferguson, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Holtzhausen, 2000; McKie & Munshi, 2007; Heath, 2006). Research has
examined the symbolic work (Edwards, 2009a) and discourses produced by public relations, challenging their neutrality (Motion, 2005; Motion & Weaver, 2005), while a small but important group of scholars has reflected on the profession using a post-colonial lens (Munshi & Kurian, 2005; Munshi & McKie, 2001). Theoretically, the field has been extended by an exploration of the application of different social theories to public relations (Ihlen & Van Ruler, 2009).

Power is central to these analyses, and the findings produced by these and other scholars are crucial to the development of the field. However, ontologically, public relations remains positioned as a separate entity from both the structures that are assumed to shape its enactment and from the agents that ‘do’ the enacting. Consequently, research tends to reflect this division: either public relations may be a (structural) source of domination, or it is an (agentic) force for change. The complexity of day-to-day public relations, where both dynamics co-exist, cannot be accessed through these lenses and the intransigence of the structure/agency divide becomes a relatively solid wall that prevents progression. Findings that emphasise the productive capacity of agency find it impossible to negotiate structural barriers to change. Critical analyses find change and development in the field problematic.

We argue that, for a socio-cultural turn to be truly productive, we must overcome this duality. This requires an ontological and epistemological break with existing understandings of public relations. In this ‘radical’ socio-cultural turn, public relations is recognised as a locus of transactions that produce emergent social and cultural meanings. These meanings become part of the fabric of society and are thereby integrated into public relations in the future.

Transactions, in this context, are defined in the sense articulated by Dewey (Dewey and Bentley, 1949 [1991]) as something that happens ‘across actors who are aspects of a relationally integrated whole […] the actors are the continuously emerging meaning in a transaction’ (Simpson, 2009: 1334). In other words, every engagement between connected actors necessarily results in a change in the identity of those actors; their identity emerges through these transactions. Actors may be individuals (e.g. practitioners, their clients, members of the public) or ‘generalized others’ (e.g. public relations consultancies, employers, professional bodies, or the professional field itself) (Simpson, 2009). In this way, public relations becomes a temporally defined, contingent and fluid articulation of structural and agentic elements of society. It is in the logic of public relations practice that these articulations, and the tensions that can characterise them, become evident.

This view represents a radical break from normative views of public relations. It rejects the functional understanding of public relations as a disinterested channel through which organisational interests are achieved. Similarly, an emphasis purely on subjective understandings of public relations, while valuable, is insufficient from a radical perspective. Instead, the analytical focus is on the manner in which material and discursive manifestations of public relations reflect the above transactions between different social actors (including the profession and its professionals), and how new meanings and identities for those social actors emerge in the process. This may become evident through accounts of individual practice in context, of the profession’s
role in a particular political environment, or through deconstructing public relations work using an alternative standpoint.

A useful framework within which to contextualise this view is Du Gay et al.'s (1997) ‘circuit of culture’. Du Gay and his colleagues argue that cultural meanings circulate and are sustained in society through five ‘moments’: production; regulation; consumption; representation; and identity. Each moment is connected with the others through a series of articulations, generating a complex web of what we term here ‘transactions’, through which meaning emerges. Integrating the concept of transactions into the understanding of the circuit of culture reinforces the interdependence of the moments that Du Gay and his colleagues emphasise, and also recognises meaning as continuously produced within the interactions of the moments, changing the identity of each moment in the process, rather than as an outcome of those interactions.

Curtin & Gaither (2007) have articulated how the circuit of culture may be used to understand public relations practice in terms of the way it generates meaning within a particular socio-cultural framework, the way in which that meaning is taken up and reproduced in various forms, and the consequences of this process for the identity of various actors in society. This analysis is productive in that it helps us to understand how the profession can be understood as a cultural intermediary occupation, a form of work that is increasingly central to economic and cultural life due to the power and influence it commands (McFall, 2002; Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Hodges, 2006). The notion of cultural intermediation has been applied to knowledge-intensive and service-oriented industries such as advertising, management consultancy, public relations and other occupational groups who are ‘… predisposed to play a vanguard role in the struggles over everything concerned with the art of living’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 366). As an influential group of occupations engaged in the production and transformation of meanings, cultural intermediaries promote the latest styles and attitudes to wider audiences in society. This cultural intermediation may be understood as a transactional process, because, rather than existing at a distance from their meaning work, cultural intermediaries are intimately involved with and implicated in it. Through lifestyles in which work and personal lives often become blurred, these occupational groupings themselves form part of the reception class for new goods and experiences (Featherstone, 1991). Thus, cultural intermediary professions can be understood as channels through which the circuit of culture is generated and unfolds.

Research into the sociologies of cultural intermediary occupations has been concerned with opening up the links between culture and economy, production and consumption, by focusing on the formal expertise and broader intellectual and cultural backgrounds of the practitioners. Studies have drawn out some of the ways in which the social make-up of practitioners, their values and motivations, and the wider workplace cultures they inhabit shape the cultural practices they perform. So far, research exploring public relations as a cultural intermediary has been limited to marketing and publicity contexts, understanding the profession as a producer of consumer culture and a promoter of new tastes and fashions (Nixon & Du Gay, 2002; Negus, 2002; Soar, 2002), or as a tool of manipulation (Negus, 2002).
We argue here, however, that such analyses are insufficient for a radical socio-cultural understanding of public relations and do not do justice to the model of the circuit as originally intended. They position the profession outside the moments of the circuit of culture and understand it as a vehicle through which they are enacted. Ultimately, this commits it to the same functional role as normative research. In contrast, our understanding of public relations as a locus of transactions that produce emergent meanings, implicates the profession as itself an articulation of the different moments of the circuit of culture. Relatively little research so far has reflected this radical view of public relations. However, there is a substantial amount of excellent work that forms the current socio-cultural turn in the field, some of which is noted above, which forms a strong starting point for work underpinned by this philosophy. What difference does a more radical socio-cultural view of public relations make to research? How does it change the analytical focus, and what potential does it offer for advancing the field? We would like to take three areas of public relations scholarship to illustrate the kinds of research questions that both a socio-cultural, and a ‘radical’ socio-cultural approach can prompt.

Questions of discourse

The production of discourse is fundamental to public relations, as is the symbolic work that is effected through (and in) discourse. Steven Mackey’s contribution to this volume illustrates the fundamental importance of this activity to society as a means by which ‘truth’ is communicated, circulates and is taken up, producing social cohesion. Elmer considers storytelling as a method through which the complex effects of these discourses might be unpicked, and their effects on practitioners’ own lives revealed. Other questions that might arise in relation to discourse are as follows.

1. **How is discourse produced?** Here, the focus is on practice, processes, professional narratives and structural dynamics such as the demands of clients and journalists. In contrast to functional approaches, socio-cultural research not only describes but also asks deeper questions about the relative privileging of different subjectivities, different forms and types of knowledge, and the complexity of practice. A radical socio-cultural view would additionally interrogate how the production of discourse through public relations may be understood as the locus of transactions that produce new understandings of the actors that contribute to them. Questions might also be asked about how discourses demonstrate these transactions by incorporating the interests and identities of the practitioner and the dynamics produced by different aspects of the context. What processes generate this interaction?

2. **What does discourse produce?** Socio-cultural work asks how the varying privilege accorded to knowledge, subjects, identities and structures feeds into cultural norms and values that position individuals and groups differently in society? How does public relations work produce social identities and social practices that sustain or change the way we understand ourselves and the groups we
belong to? From a radical socio-cultural perspective, additional questions would be raised about how the discourses themselves not only describe and direct, but incorporate structures, identities and subjects in different socio-cultural milieux, and how these different elements contradict and cohere with each other. Additionally, questions informed by public relations’ cultural intermediary role could address the ways in which discourses produced through public relations act reflexively on public relations, given that the transactions inherent in them simultaneously generate new meanings for the profession.

Questions of context

A socio-cultural turn in any field by definition also demands an examination of the context in which action takes place. This context can be understood as global, national and local, depending on the level of analysis. Anthropologically-inflected sociological approaches of the kind advocated by L’Etang in this volume, add subtlety to organisational or political economic perspectives of context, broadening the frameworks for analysis of public relations to cover a wide range of possible lenses through which public relations may be analysed. Additional questions that are prompted by considerations of context could include the following:

3. What aspects of the social and cultural context produce and sustain different forms of public relations? How do changes in the context change the role and substance of public relations? How do the profession and its professionals manage the demands and fluidity of the context? A radical socio-cultural view would also ask questions about how the different forms of public relations can illustrate the engagement of public relations practitioners, as individuals, with their context, as a ‘generalised other’. The reflexive nature of these engagements is also of interest, and inevitably focuses the researcher on the temporality of the profession and its work.

4. How is public relations affected by different histories? These may be social and cultural histories of different groups and individuals, broader ‘national’ histories and identities, or global relationships. What legacy have these histories left for public relations? How do such legacies prepare the profession for its future? How does public relations perpetuate or challenge the values, assumptions and structures that have privileged different groups historically? Additionally, radical socio-cultural questions would include questions about how transactions between historically determined structures and cultural identities of groups and individuals take shape in different types of public relations identities and activities, producing meanings with specific material and discursive effects.

Questions of the profession

Finally, a socio-cultural understanding of public relations must interrogate the profession itself as a social group, a social function, and a status project that itself emerges
from and sustains a particular set of social and cultural norms and structures. Questions here include the following.

5. Why is the profession constituted in a particular form? How is it structured and what purposes do these structures serve? How is power articulated through the profession? How do professional dynamics preserve the status of individuals and justify their role? A radical view additionally asks how transactions between public relations professionals and professional structures sustain or change each of these entities and, in the process, produce new forms of public relations? How can public relations be understood in terms of transactions internal to the field, as well as transactions between the field and its professionals in a wider social context?

These questions illustrate the epistemological demands of a socio-cultural view of public relations. Context must become an integral part of public relations scholarship. It is not enough to analyse practice, processes or indeed professional cultures themselves in isolation from the environment in which they are produced. A radical socio-cultural view pushes further into this complexity by arguing that, since public relations is a locus of transactions, they themselves must be central to any analysis. The messiness of day-to-day practice, with its contradictions and inconsistencies, should not be regarded as a ‘difficulty’ of public relations, but part of its ontology, of the continuous flow of transactions that is public relations reality, simultaneously producing, enacting and feeding back into, social and cultural norms.

The chapters in this book address some of these questions, and are all linked by their concern to situate public relations firmly in its socio-cultural context. The questions raised by the authors, and the analyses they carry out, betray a desire to delve more deeply into what Elmer (Chapter 3) calls the messiness of the profession, to understand its complexities, its contradictions, its links to myth and reality, its connections with the beliefs, values and attitudes held by individuals and groups and its potential for both domination and liberation as the struggle between constraining structures and creative agents continues through and in its work. The chapters also illustrate the range of methods that a (radical) socio-cultural approach might adopt – from ethnography and discourse analysis to storytelling and narrative approaches – although the approaches are linked by an awareness of public relations as a site where complex contexts act and react with groups and individuals.

The chapters

In the first of two chapters which highlight the need for a more in-depth engagement with culture, Jacquie L’Etang proposes a fresh approach to analysing and interpreting public relations – through the lens of anthropology. Anthropological imaginings, for L’Etang, would encourage scholars to explore public relations practice in the context of daily life, focusing in particular on the interactions between public relations practitioners as cultural agents and the specific cultural environments in which they
work – whether occupational, organisational or societal. Drawing on a diverse and interdisciplinary literature, L’Etang is interested in the reflexive nature of public relations research and practice as a departure from the functional instrumental approaches which, the chapter argues, have dominated public relations to date. Anthropological imaginings in public relations would not only generate new insight from fieldwork which engages with ethnography and participant observation, both discussed in detail in this chapter, but would encourage scholars to turn away from simplified structures and processes to produce more nuanced interpretations of practice and facilitate the telling of so far untold stories.

The benefits of this in-depth engagement with culture become clear in Caroline Hodges’ ethnographic account of public relations in Mexico City. A functional description of the profession and its roles and responsibilities, operationalising ‘Mexican culture’ using the generic Hofstede (1980) principles, would have failed to recognise the way in which the cultural and social history, present and future of the local environment are constituted through, and materially affect public relations practice. In contrast, combining insights from Latin American postmodern scholarship with an understanding of the particular nature of the modern ‘megalopolis’ allows Hodges to develop new reference points for her analysis. The narrative of public relations that emerges from this barely touches on organisational functions, but instead reflects the degree to which professionals understand their role in terms of the social and cultural circumstances in which they live and work. The organisation does not form the territorial boundary for their work; they take their work with them, reflecting on and enacting ‘public relations’ throughout their day-to-day lives. The quotes that Hodges uses to illustrate this narrative of public relations make evident the degree of reflexivity that these professionals have, and it is here that the interaction between agency and structure is most clearly evident. Public relations, for these people, is an opportunity to influence and engage with structures that shape their lives. The narratives they produce in the course of their work, which draw on traditional notions of Mexican culture and social structure, also suggest new or more developed roles for individuals in Mexican society – roles that they themselves also explore. This is not to say that Mexican public relations produces a utopia; but it does demonstrate that public relations has a complex effect that is rooted in its articulation of the connections between structure and agency.

Greater understanding of this role could emerge through the storytelling approach to public relations advocated in our third chapter, by Paul Elmer. Elmer strongly argues the case for an ‘anthropology-inflected sociology’ involving more sustained and detailed examination of practice as a way of moving the field forward, echoing Jacque L’Etang’s anthropological imaginings and Edwards’ Bourdieuvian approach. In conceptualising public relations as cultural labour, he highlights questions about agency, structure, and their interaction, in the professional context. Storytelling, he suggests, forms a powerful epistemological focal point for analyses, because it allows scholars to engage with ‘common-sense’ notions of public relations that do more to help us comprehend the messiness of professional life than reified models of practice derived from abstract theory.
It will also reveal how stories themselves are used by practitioners in their work to make sense of this messiness, for them and their audiences, not least in the process of acquiring capital to advance their own cause. Thus, diverse understandings of stories as folklore, as systems outcomes, and as fragmented or unitary, form a rich and evolving tradition of scholarship from which this approach to public relations can benefit.

‘Public relations and society: A Bourdieuvian perspective’, the first of two chapters by Lee Edwards, considers the PR profession in the UK as a social group, drawing on case study and in-depth qualitative research to illustrate connections and tensions between society, the public relations profession and practitioners as social agents. Applying the framework of fields, capital and habitus developed by French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, Edwards considers how the beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, identities and structures relevant to this professional group feed into cultural norms, values and expectations that position the profession differently within society. This chapter explores how social structures are reflected in public relations practice. For example, in the recruitment of new practitioners to the profession, both explicit and implicit criteria for entry might be applied which privilege a small group of elite individuals by specifying and rewarding a particular type of person with a particular social and educational background. The experiences and worldviews relevant to this elite group will be reflected in PR practice; in other words, how this group views and understands the world will influence their approach to public relations work, which, as Edwards argues, has implications for the power that is held by the public relations industry.

Edwards’ second chapter, ‘Diversity in public relations’, further develops the discussion of the ways in which social structures and cultural identities are reflected in public relations practice. This chapter applies post-colonial and critical race theory to critically analyse the functional and socio-cultural dynamics of diversity and begins by outlining the range of discourses about diversity in PR scholarship. Suggesting that the public relations industry in the UK is inherently shaped by whiteness, Edwards draws on her own year-long research study to compare professional discourses of diversity within public relations with the lived experiences of practitioners from diverse ethnic backgrounds who are made to feel different in some way from the social, professional and Western-oriented norm. Edwards argues that in order to fully appreciate public relations as a socio-cultural profession, a critical approach to diversity in relation to whiteness is required together with recognition of the diverse voices and alternative rationalities (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007) that exist within the profession.

The Western paradigm of public relations as a formal function that has specific and clear roles is challenged by Caroline Hodges and Nilam McGrath’s contribution, ‘Communication for social transformation’. Extending existing ideas about communitarianism, dialogue and symmetrical communication in public relations, they highlight the contingent meaning of such concepts in different cultural situations and the problems this can produce for a formulaic approach to the tasks public relations professionals can face. They introduce ideas from the field of social communication and draw on Latin American theorists to reconceptualise what public relations might
be in a context where it forms part of a transformational process, rather than a purely informational one. Here, agency and engagement are emphasised and the analysis addresses some of the most important questions for practitioners today: What can we do with people? How can we work together in concrete ways? How does this work contribute to the empowerment of individuals and communities? Importantly, positioning public relations as the locus of transactions also transforms the practitioner. In the case study drawn on by the authors, there was no formal public relations function. Instead, project coordinators and some participants were ‘communication intermediaries’; the lynchpins that held the project together and became the point of reference for the community. This radical understanding of the public relations function prompts us as scholars to loosen our ties to ‘the public relations practitioner’ and look beyond formal, organisationally defined boxes for evidence of the work in which we are so interested. This is not to say that we must incorporate all communications within the public relations field. But we must allow the informal, untrained practice of organisational communication to become part of the messy picture that we investigate.

The last two chapters in the book address in particular the persuasive work undertaken by public relations. Through Stephen Mackey’s application of Charles Pierce’s pragmatism and semiotics to public relations, we begin to understand why the profession’s work is so contested. Mackey argues that Peirce’s insights into our truth-seeking behaviour provide a rationale both for understanding why public relations is so effective (it offers us something to believe in), and also provides a lens through which we can understand the sometimes visceral critique of public relations activity. If we recognise that public relations is manipulating, or taking advantage of, our desire for certainty, or is misrepresenting an apparent truth, we will reject it because belief is so central to our individual identity and stability, and to social coherence. Therefore, in the act of producing meaning, public relations is addressing a fundamental element of human sense-making processes and will always challenge or sustain belief, often doing both at the same time, depending on the audience. This understanding, which recognises the transactional nature of public relations, demands a reflexive profession, and reflexive scholarship, that recognises its role in the ‘work-in-progress’ that is the social and cultural environment.

The final chapter by Kristin Demetrious, ‘Bubble Wrap: Social media, public relations, culture and society’ illustrates one area where Mackey’s ideas are particularly relevant: the world of social media. Demetrious argues that the uncertainty produced by increasing social fragmentation has generated a perceived need for people to connect and find cohesion. Applying a ‘broad-based sociological and cultural approach’, this chapter seeks to cast light on the social structures underlying social media communication and the cultural transformations that are produced as a consequence. Focusing on the impact of social media on how we understand and experience the public sphere and newly emerging patterns of social relations, Demetrious challenges the idea of community as something necessarily linked to geographical space. Nonetheless, through transactions enacted in a social media context, public relations work constructs this cohesion by generating belief in it through
the manipulation of meanings associated with the concept of community that draw on traditional geographical notions of proximity and use social artefacts such as newspapers and advertising to simulate a material, rather than virtual, reality. Demetrious argues social media has created its own vocabulary, in direct opposition to market-oriented discourse, which is used to deliberately construct a culture of uniformity grounded in an ethos of positive social interaction. The use of social media by commercial and political interests taps into the search for truth and belief that we continue to desire in an apparently fragmented world. As Mackey suggests in the previous chapter, this raises significant ethical questions for those championing the use of social media on behalf of their clients. The new meanings associated with ‘community’ and ‘friends’ that they produce serve to uphold public relations’ position as a persuasive and hegemonic controller of public opinion and deny the simplistic claims of ‘engagement’ and ‘relationship building’ that are used to justify such work.

Conclusion

These different approaches to understanding public relations remove the need to produce research that ‘improves’ public relations, or makes it ‘more effective’. Instead, research retains its exploratory and creative character, using methodologies that tend not to prescribe but instead allow for the work to be informed as much by the participants as it is by the researchers. As we have seen, such techniques include case studies, ethnographies, discourse analyses, in-depth qualitative work, narrative and storytelling techniques. Seminal works that gather such insights together include L’Etang and Pieckza (1996, 2006), Heath (2001), McKie & Munshi (2007), Moloney (2006) and Botan & Hazelton (2006). Through this work, the limitations of normative scholarship are being addressed gradually, but more is required. For example, more ethnographies of public relations from other geographical regions and national contexts would enrich our understanding of the profession. They would also enable us to see the links between meanings produced in different contexts, that nonetheless connect and produce practice and people in the globalised world (Edwards, 2011).

The challenge here is not simply to use new techniques, but to adopt a radical spirit in their implementation; reversing traditional power dynamics, trusting participants and their ‘messy’ lives to ultimately tell an alternative story about public relations that can inform our understanding. This short volume contributes to this process by presenting work that is at once diverse but also linked by its concern to situate public relations firmly in its socio-cultural, rather than organisational, context. In the spirit of L’Etang & Pieczka (1996), the chapters offer a new set of insights into public relations that will push the field into different territories, deepen its theoretical foundation and inspire new work.

References and further reading


IMAGINING PUBLIC RELATIONS ANTHROPOLOGY

Jacquie L’Etang

Introduction

This essay explores the potential of ‘public relations anthropology’ to inspire directions of thought and research in public relations that can help us to understand more fully the lives and roles that public relations practitioners enact within contemporary societies. Anthropology can help us to analyse and interpret public relations work and workers within and between cultures and micro-cultures, and it offers a route to exploring public relations practice in the context of people’s daily lives in specific communities and contexts – something which tends not to be addressed in the public relations literature.

Why anthropology? One good answer could be that given by George Leigh Mallory who, when asked, in 1923, why he wanted to climb Everest responded, ‘Because it’s there’. Why anthropology? Well, why not? Public relations as a discipline is a work-in-progress that has borrowed ideas from many other disciplines especially psychology, management and organisation studies and marketing, but also from political science, philosophy, media studies and social theory. However, there are more compelling reasons why public relations scholarship would do well to give attention to anthropology. Although the interests of anthropology – culture, communication, change (globalisation, consumerism, technology) – are all central to public relations, the strategies, tactics and outcomes (outputs) of anthropology are very different to those of public relations scholarship. Anthropology offers alternative approaches to thinking and writing about public relations. For example, the discipline of anthropology is an exemplar of reflexivity and is characterised by a particular research approach – that of ethnography – both of which are rare in public relations (Daymon & Hodges, 2009). In short, the anthropological imagination offers considerable potential for public relations scholars and practitioners. In advocating an anthropological approach, I suggest some possible lines of enquiry that could put
some flesh on the public relations skeleton. ‘Imagining public relations’ opens up creative possibilities and new and alternative storylines rendered through empathetic listening and interpretive readings derived from ethnographic methodology.

The dominance of functional instrumental research in the public relations discipline has resulted in uni-dimensional and rather unimaginative outputs about formal roles and idealistic prescriptions about how public relations should be practised ethically and effectively. But we know virtually nothing about PR work-styles, lifestyles and practice cultures, or practitioners’ engagement with local cultures and meaning-creation activities and impacts within them.

The anthropological positioning of this chapter foregrounds ‘cultures’, that is to say, spheres of meaning that unify communities in societal contexts, as a primary focus for public relations. Culture has multiple definitions. For example, definitions have included:

The total way of life of a people … the social legacy the individual acquires from his group … a way of thinking, feeling and believing … an abstraction from behaviour … a storehouse of pooled learning … a set of standardised orientations to recurrent problems … learned behaviour … a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men … a precipitation of history …

(Geertz, 2009: 4)

Culture incorporates mental architecture and patterns of behaviour within self-referencing communities that possess recognisable identity and share meanings among individual members through specialised language and symbols. As a communications discipline, public relations practitioners need ‘culture-capacity’ – the ability to recognise, understand and communicate with diverse cultures at multiple levels, for example: ethnic, organisational, occupational, political, recreational.

Geertz remarked that the concept of culture ‘is essentially a semiotic one’ (Geertz, 2009: 4). He supported Max Weber’s view that, ‘man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself spins’ and that these webs comprised culture (Geertz, 2009: 4). This metaphor is of great interest in a public relations context because of the popularity of the term ‘spin doctor’ that, in many cultures, portrays the PR practitioner as the spider spinning webs (often employing trickery or deceit to capture unsuspecting audiences). The metaphor also implies PR’s role in producing discourses, seeking to influence which webs have ‘significance’.

In this chapter, I suggest that anthropology and its characteristic research approach – ethnography – could offer alternative insights into the roles of public relations in contemporary societies and promotional cultures. I highlight some anthropological concepts that might generate alternative readings of PR, and drive research in new directions under the rubric ‘public relations anthropology’.

I begin with a definitional discussion of anthropology and its defining method, that of ethnography; the connection between public relations and culture; and proceed to a brief review of literature on applied anthropology in media, marketing and
organisation studies. Finally, I consider how anthropological concepts and ethno-
graphic approaches could contribute to public relations research and practice, and
highlight issues and concepts that could form starting points for a new research
agenda.

**Anthropology**

Anthropology has been defined as ‘the study of other cultures’ (Rapport & Overing,
2007: 109) and is a holistic discipline that includes science, social science and the
humanities incorporating, for example, zoology, archaeology and history. Anthro-
pology draws on social theory for its conceptualisations, but adds multicultural and
symbolic dimensions. Culture is generally seen as a largely, though not exclusively,
human production, which has ‘spiritual, organizational, and material items’ involving
‘human knowledge, opinions, convictions, values and beliefs’. (Smajs, 2006: 636).

Although historically, anthropologists studied ethnic cultures (and was subsequently
critiqued from post-colonial perspectives for its Othering of ‘exotic tribes’), anthro-
pologists have extended their practice to micro-cultures in specific contexts and small
communities, such as occupations, workplaces, health, science, sport and leisure. An
anthropological approach to public relations not only opens up opportunities to gain
new knowledge about public relations type activities in different cultural contexts and
marginalised societies, but to derive new conceptual insights that may differ from the
currently US-dominated discipline.

Cultural exchanges at all levels have multiplied as a consequence of globalisation
and increased global travel and tourism, patterns of migration and diasporic move-
ments. Anthropological interests reflect these changes and are diverse, encompassing,
for example:

- Ethnicity, identity, local and global politics, development, social inequality,
  gender, material culture, globalisation, diaspora, lived experience, discourse,
  representation and the objectification and commodification of culture.

  *(Leite & Graburn, 2009: 34)*

These issues are relevant to public relations because public relations is both issue-
driven and necessary at moments of change and transformation. Public relations
anthropology would explore micro-cultural formations and inter-relationships
beyond the organisational and the national. Viewed through the kaleidoscopic lens
of anthropology, public relations activities can be understood within and between
multiple concurrent and overlapping cultures.

Anthropology is reflexive and anthropologists continue to debate theoretical
criteria which, according to Geertz, while not identifying regularities or general
abstractions should provide a coherent interpretation of the past that retains a longer-
term validity (Fortun & Fortun, 2010: xxi). Culture is essentially a moving target,
continuously subject to global shifts and technological change, which means that
anthropologists need to respond to new social phenomena and subject these to thick
description and analysis in order to generate meaning and understanding. For this reason, anthropology is an essay-based discipline (a literary form rather alien to public relations) in which cultural interpretations and theoretical debate are integrated, and ethnographies may include inter-woven narratives, vignettes, pictures and artefacts.

Anthropology offers a very different intellectual approach to the field of public relations, as in anthropology there is no attempt to generate general theories. Geertz pointed out that such general theorisation has ‘little profit in it’, because the purpose of theory-building was ‘not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalise across cases, but to generalise within them’ (Geertz, 2009: 19). This inductive approach contrasts with much work in public relations that tends to be deductive, applying generalised frameworks or theories to data (both quantitative and qualitative). An anthropological approach to public relations would not only generate new forms of data through ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, but would also analyse data differently. An anthropological approach to public relations would produce multiple interpretations of practice, tell currently untold stories, and generally contribute multilayered insights into practice (see also Hodges and Elmer, this volume). Such work would plumb beneath the surface layer knowledge currently constructed as ‘science’ in the field. Rather than being constrained by existing approaches, frameworks and concepts, public relations anthropologists would conduct long-stay participant observation of public relations workers (including agents performing public relations roles but with different job titles, or even unofficially as unpaid volunteers – see Hodges and McGrath, this volume) in various cultural, micro-cultural and organisational cultural contexts.

**Ethnography and anthropology**

Anthropologists have often cited ethnography as the distinguishing feature and method of anthropology, some not even recognising fieldwork that takes place outside anthropology as ethnography (Atkinson et al., 2001: 2). Ethnography is characterised by participant observation over a substantial period of time, during which the researcher seeks to understand the local culture through observation, informal empathetic interviewing and reflexive analysis.

One way of understanding the relationship between anthropology and ethnography is as a hierarchical relation between strategic purpose and tactics, or between *praxis* and *technic*. Ethnography is characterised by anthropologists as long-stay immersion in another culture in which the researcher performs the function of participant observer, recording ‘field notes’ and ‘scratch notes’, supplemented with empathetic interviewing and informal conversations. Atkinson et al. define parameters within which research techniques can be defined as ethnography, as follows:

A commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting, on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation. Observation and participation (according to circumstance and the analytic purpose at hand) remain the characteristic features of the ethnographic
The researcher seeks to understand the studied culture from the point of view of culture-members, and writes up their findings as a ‘rich’ and ‘thick’ description, to which they may add reflexive analysis and conceptualisation, that contextualises findings in relation to social theory. As Boyer suggested:

> The core of the craft of social-cultural anthropology is the polylogue between the analytical work of social theory and the representational work of ethnography. (Boyer, 2010: 241)

At present, this sort of work is largely missing from the public relations canon. And although Ihlen et al. (2009) present a range of social theorists, cross-sliced analysis of social theories in relation to public relations theories, concepts and practice would produce a genealogical history and politics of ideas in the field that could be instructive. In other words, anthropological understandings of public relations along with ethnographic data could be mapped across onto a range of social theories in order to contextualise epistemological, ontological and methodological underpinnings in handling culture.

**Public relations cultures, practitioners as culture-workers**

The connection between public relations work and culture is fundamental, as public relations is involved in ‘border crossings’, continually crossing cultures within and between organisations and communities (online and offline). Public relations practitioners are ‘culture-workers’ – and not only when they are involved in culture-change programmes (see, for example, both Hodges and Hodges & McGrath, this volume).

The notion of cultural context goes beyond national or ethnic cultures to reflect globalised realities of multiple overlapping cultures and multiple culture-memberships for individuals. Public relations is also a feature of the development of a specialised ‘promotional culture’ (Wernick, 1991), a consequence of late-twentieth-century consumerism and commodification, which has produced a particular form of discourse, values and expectations. Promotional culture is a global phenomenon, part of the standardisation processes of globalisation (Ritzer, 2000, 2002). Promotional values and discourse have infiltrated rituals of birth, kinship, sexual initiation, marriage, leisure and play, death, religious beliefs and practices, as well as more prosaic practices such as those relating to health, education, values of exchange (barter, money systems) and other knowledge systems (science and technology) (L’Etang, 2008: 216). Nevertheless promotional culture remains subject to broader cultural contexts, and there is dynamic interplay between host cultures and their component parts (multicultural contexts), and the economic and political class cultures and ideologies, the
power of which has driven the expansion of promotional culture. Thus the idea of culture has become ever more fragmented, dynamic and overlapping in continual processes of transformation, a condition to which anthropologists have responded with vigour and invention. The challenge is to reflect upon the potential multiplicity of public relations practice cultures as well as the roles that public relations may play ‘between the hyphens’ in culture or enacting culture.

Public relations is involved in inter-cultural communications between different organisations, media and international stakeholders and publics located in various countries. In a globalised world, the public relations industry services many diverse international organisations including multinational corporations, all of which require international diplomacy and the skills of inter-cultural communication. Such work used to be referred to as ‘international public relations’, although this term has now been partly supplanted by the terms cross-cultural or global public relations. International public relations is necessarily inter-cultural and of course includes diplomacy, public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and international political communication (L’Etang, 2010). The challenge here is to reflect upon the potential multiplicity of public relations practice cultures and micro-cultures as well as the roles that public relations plays ‘between the hyphens’ in culture or enacting culture.

The bulk of literature that reflects on public relations and culture has taken a cross-cultural approach to the subject, making comparisons between cultures generally employing frameworks of cultural determinants, particularly those of Hofstede (1980, 2001), in order to improve the effectiveness of international public relations practice (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009: 11). Much of the work has been shaped by the assumptions of the excellence paradigm and has been quantitative and dominated by US public relations scholarship. Curiously, the numerous studies of ethnic cultures are almost entirely based on research strategies and techniques other than ethnography, as becomes evident from detailed analysis of the literature (L’Etang, 2010).

The term ‘public relations anthropology’ has not been much used before, although culture – the concept central to anthropology – is also a priority for those in public relations. Occasions on which anthropology has been the focus of attention include a bibliography compiled for use by practitioners (Watson, 2005); a brief mention by McKie & Munshi (2007); and a plea by Vujnovic & Kruckeberg (2010) for ‘an anthropological approach to public relations … [because] … the ritual of everyday practices can be best understood using [such] methods’.

It was with this in mind that Watson (2005) compiled her bibliography for practitioners (sponsored by General Motors) ‘to promote integrated research between anthropology and public relations’ and included anthropological sources on the themes of community relations, corporate relations, cultural diversity, educational relations, international relations and political relations.

The study of the public relations occupation as a culture, has not, to date, been the subject of much research (but see Hodges 2006, 2010a; Terry, 2005; Daymon & Hodges, 2009 and Pieczka, 1997, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, whose contributions I discuss later). There have been some analyses of public relations drawing on ethnographic work, specifically we can consider Sussman’s mixed method study on the personnel
and ideology of public relations in the US (Sussman, 1948–49); British scholar Pimlott’s study of public relations and democracy (Pimlott, 1951); and that of the British media sociologist, Jeremy Tunstall (1964). From an organisational perspective Filby & Willmott’s study concentrated on a public relations department of a state bureaucracy focusing on the concepts of ideology and myth to explore ‘the symbolic mediations between these specialists and (their enactment of) the host organisation’s definition of their work’ (Filby & Willmott, 1988: 335). Their analysis developed the argument that differing ideologies of public relations work that were present in the organisation were a consequence of labour markets and production relations – an outgrowth of the political economy.

Pieczka (1997) was perhaps the first to signal the importance of ethnography and phenomenological approaches in her interest in the everyday life of practitioners, and her subsequent ethnographic work based on classic participant observation focused on public relations expertise and ‘personal chemistry’ (Pieczka, 2002, 2006a, 2006b). Around the same time, a small but significant change in the architecture of international public relations literature took place. Several pieces of work were published which drew on the British cultural studies tradition and specifically, the ‘circuit of culture’ (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, 2007; Hodges, 2006, 2010a; Terry, 2005). Hodges and Daymon & Hodges took ethnographic approaches while other work took a more general qualitative approach (Bardhan, 2003). Because of the closeness of publication dates, it seems that in some cases the authors were unaware of each other’s work, as made apparent in their respective bibliographies.

Hodges studied public relations occupational culture in Mexico City through participant observation, conducted while employed as a full-time public relations consultant in that city (see also Hodges, this volume). Terry was a Fulbright scholar who spent 10 months undertaking participant observation in Kazakhstan 2001–2. She used the circuit as a way of interpreting the identity of public relations, how public relations was represented, produced, consumed and regulated. In her pessimistic analysis she argued that public relations was associated with the elite, ‘a tool of power’ (Terry, 2005: 33) and operated as commercial exchange – ‘gate-keeping is a monetary proposition; agenda-setting is for-profit’ (Terry, 2005: 34). Terry suggested that conditions in Kazakhstan hindered the development of PR in the ‘Western tradition’ (read US) and, specifically, the concepts of excellence and symmetry promoted by the dominant paradigm (Terry, 2005: 34) and questioned the globalisation of such concepts. Her work illustrates the influence of the dominant paradigm on those researching other cultures, where such concepts and approaches are not relevant and may potentially impede a deeper understanding of the culture being studied.

One of the notable features of some of these ethnographically inspired pieces of writing is their brevity. This is in no way intended as a criticism of the authors, more so of editors and reviewers, who perhaps did not accept full-length works that were able to show data; or the intellectual environment of public relations which deterred those authors from submitting their ethnographic accounts in fuller form. Qualitative research reports remain relatively unusual, a rare useful exception is Braun’s account of public relations in Bulgaria (Braun, 2007). Either way, the absence suggests untold
stories and unheard voices, including the reflexive auto-ethnography of authors’ inter-cultural experiences.

The British Cultural Studies tradition has recently been given attention within public relations. Cultural Studies can be distinguished from anthropology by its main focus on the way in which social divisions, often based on class, gender and race relations are naturalised and represented to sever the connection between these and political and economic inequality (Hartley, 1994: 71–73). Curtin & Gaither (2005, 2007) drew on Cultural Studies to argue that public relation practitioners play a crucial role as ‘cultural intermediaries’ in the cultural processes in which meaning is created, modified, and reinvented during processes of symbolisation, representation, consumption and identity formation. Curtin & Gaither (2005: 93) explained the cultural turn in public relations as a move from transmission models of mass communication to concerns around discourse and the cultural and political economies. They explained that the ‘circuit of culture’ is helpful in viewing critically communication processes linked to power processes, knowledge use and exchange and the production of socially constructed knowledge. Such an approach assumes contested meanings, alternative readings and dialectical processes involved in the production of social meanings that inform the nature of the culture.

A rather different form of engagement with culture and anthropological issues is the critical and culture-centred work done by authors applying the concepts and frameworks of post-colonialism (Bardhan, 2003; Pal & Dutta, 2008; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Munshi, 1999; Munshi & Kurian, 2005). These authors combined post-colonialism with discursive approaches and postmodernism (Holtzhausen, 2000, 2002a, 2002b) to propose critical approaches (critical modernism) to cultural analysis in the context of globalisation and to challenge the idea of universal practices (Pal & Dutta, 2008: 162). For example:

Cultures exist in continuous flux, continuously interpreted and reinterpreted through human interactions, and embedded within the context of the lives of the members of the cultures. Culture is both a carrier of traditions and a site of transformation. It is within this dialectical tension between tradition and transformation that identities and relationships become meaningful, suggesting the necessity of conceptualizing public relations within an organic framework of evolving relationships rather than within a simplistic modernist frame that seeks to develop the best strategy for a national culture based on predefined markers.

(Pal & Dutta, 2008: 167–68)

However, while sympathetic to the thrust of this argument, I think that it is important to engage ethnographically with fluctuating micro-cultures and specific local sites where the said tensions appear likely to be experienced. The specialist field of environmental anthropology offers some interesting examples for public relations of policy debates and decision-taking in the context of culturally diverse community settings that include studies of stakeholder engagement and relationships, issue formation and activism in relation to ecology, that are of direct interest to public relations academics (Dove & Carpenter, 2008).
Within the public relations canon, a further significant step has been the publication of the edited text *Public relations and social theory* (Ihlen et al., 2009), which focused on public relations as a social activity showcasing a range of sociologists and social theorists, some of whom had anthropological backgrounds, such as Bourdieu, Goffman and Latour.

**Applied anthropology: lessons for public relations theory and practice**

In the fields of business, management and organisation, marketing and media studies, interpretive and instrumental uses have been made of anthropological insights and ethnographic research. Anthropology and ethnography could likewise generate both theoretical and practical outcomes for public relations.

Organisational cultural theorists have recognised the significance of anthropology for their field. The ethnographic method has come to be recognised as a crucial tool in understanding organisational life (Schwartzman, 1993). Ethnographic applications in organisational behaviour and management and in consumer behaviour and marketing are relevant to a consideration of public relations in those contexts, as an agent, a service, a participant, and a consumer within organisational cultures, as well as in its contribution in various societal contexts: local, national and international. Ethnographic research could be valuable to public relations practice in applied research for those practitioners involved in organisational culture, organisational identity and internal communication. Within organisations, public relations practitioners need to be able to read and understand cultural traits, norms and taboos. A more nuanced understanding could be advanced by analysing organisational cultural folkways (customs that contribute to order and stability including social conventions and manners); mores (morally inspired conventions to which society requires members to conform); laws (political regulation); and belief systems (including scientific, philosophical, religious, supernatural) (Murty & Vyas, 2006: 634).

The rise of marketing anthropology is reflected in the fact that, ‘top business schools are teaching future business leaders the value of participant observation, close reading and interpretive summary’ (Baba, 2006: 111). A major early contribution was that of Arnould & Wallendorf (1994), which showed the value of ethnographic research for marketing strategy. In particular, ethnography offered insights that could contribute to new product development, brand innovation and consumer behaviour. Ethnographic methods offered not only understanding but a creative and catalytic engagement with consumers that developed into critical interventions, problem-solving as well as insights into various ethnic and micro-cultures. Overall, marketing ethnography focuses on issues that impact brand and business development but has also appropriated territories that public relations practitioners and academics might see as their domain: those of corporate culture and corporate social responsibility.

Marketing ethnography offers public relations an insight into alternative methodologies for public relations practice that may not have been considered hitherto. Ethnography does not tend to be mentioned in books and articles on applied public
relations research for practice. The anthropological approach and the ethnographic method could, however, offer practitioners new ways of understanding stakeholders, publics, communities and organisations in the context of global change. Action anthropology and ethnography can open up areas of applied research with the potential to build collaborative platforms among and between the many micro-cultures with which public relations engages.

Media anthropology encompasses interpretivist research to understand media processes, its role in society, as well as more instrumental approaches, which seek to offer opportunities to intervene in practice. Media anthropology not only employs anthropological terminology, but has adapted terms or invented new terms such as media event, media ritual, media panic, ceremonial television.

Media anthropology encompasses ritual (and its implications for power) (Couldry, 2005: 59), celebrity and symbolic power/cultism (Lardellier, 2005; Rothenbuhler, 2005), religious and spiritual forms (Thomas, 2005), myth (Lule, 2005), storytelling (Schudson, 2005), performance (Petersen, 2005), audiences (La Pastina, 2005), events (Dayan, 2005; Rothenbuhler, 2005; Zelizer, 2005). It also includes more specific studies into local news-making (Bird, 2010). Osorio (2005) suggested that key anthropological concepts which have emerged as useful in analysing media include: ritual, assimilation, acculturation and diffusion, the last three of which have a connection to persuasion, and are therefore of interest to public relations scholars. Critical work of high relevance to public relations also includes ethnographic studies that explore journalism as fieldwork and propaganda (Hasty, 2010) or as gossip and resistance (Dracklé, 2010).

Media studies offers a useful exemplar for public relations, in that it demonstrates a type of research that is rare in public relations. In particular the role that public relations plays in the social construction of reality and, in this context, its relationship to traditional and digital media, and its role in culture more widely, remain to be explored in any depth.

Towards anthropological and ethnographic research agendas in public relations

Anthropology and the ethnographic tradition offers public relations alternative lines of enquiry that can reveal the ‘public relations in everyday life’ both of its practitioners and in the multiple cultural contexts within which it operates. Anthropologically inspired ethnographic research could elicit occupational cultural traits and norms, as well as the philosophies of knowledge, mores and ideological beliefs of occupational members (see also both Elmer and Mackey, this volume).

There are various levels at which anthropology and ethnography can be applied to public relations. At the theoretical level, the influences, concepts and debates of social theory can be applied to produce an historiography of ideas in public relations. For example, systems theory emerged from anthropology’s structural-functionalism largely concerned with social ordering and conflict resolution in societies that were sometimes presented by anthropologists as being stable and static (Macdonald, 2001: 66).
Such assumptions may become embedded as Pieczka pointed out in her critique suggesting that systems theory has been used in public relations to recreate an ideal community analogous to ‘the rural township’ in which shared assumptions and values predispose community actors towards consensus-seeking and conflict-resolution (Pieczka, 2006c: 356). She argued that this was misleading and that societies may be focused on struggle, that the role of power, including discursive or knowledge power were significant factors and that issues were as likely to lead to conflict and antagonism as the equilibrium of consensus (Pieczka, 2006c: 356–57). Gershon’s anthropological review of Luhmannian systems is also instructive in highlighting the limits in systems theory, largely in relation to consideration of communications within a systems framework since Luhmann removes ‘the person as a conscious (or even unconscious) social actor from his systems theory’ (Gershon, 2005: 99).

Gershon argues that the ‘eras[ure] of the person as an agent’ is significant because it reflects the reality that:

[t]he systems that people on the ground face are increasingly global, that erase the messy contours of cultural difference. Economic flows, governmental networks, legal structures – all can be examined as colliding systems that create subject positions, but do not necessarily engage with subjects.

(Gershon, 2005: 99–100)

The fact that systems theory in public relations has tended to focus on organisations as actors, rather than on people as members of cultures may go some way to explaining the severely functionalist view that has dominated the field, which remains short of the interpretive reflexivity which developed in anthropology in the 1970s as post-colonial perspectives came to the fore. Latterly, anthropology has tended to focus on actors and agents as a balance to structural functionalism.

Public relations occupational cultures

Cultural concepts are central to an understanding of public relations as an occupational culture as well as a form of culture-worker. Classic anthropological concerns such as ritual, rites, rules and norms, symbolism, exchange and reciprocity, taboo, magic, sorcery, liminality, material cultures, power and authority might all be applied to public relations occupational cultures or to the cultures within which public relations practitioners participate (see, for example, both Hodges and Demetrious, this volume). The role of public relations in culture highlights practices of performativity, impression management, and communicative competence, all of which might be usefully applied to analysis of public relations pitches and other aspects of ‘client handling’.

Research into public relations occupational cultures would fall under the rubric of the tradition of ethnography of work. Such research has analysed how people do their jobs, how and why they take decisions, stresses and tensions experienced in a great variety of workplaces and in relation to the gamut of jobs, with high and low status in the wider culture. Smith pointed out that:
[in] the study of the unacknowledged, the hidden, the insider knowledge, the 
unwritten but pervasive rules governing jobs … [there exist] ‘understudied 
occupations’ often considered unskilled and sometimes considered to be mar- 
ginal or trivial … conversely, ethnographic researchers have taken the work of 
professionals and semi-professionals and rendered them ordinary, accessible and 
routinized.

(Smith, 2001: 222)

Given the public relations ‘professional project’ (Pieczka & L’Etang, 2001) which sits 
at odds with its public reputation, it would be invaluable indeed to follow up the 
culturally and sociologically inspired works examined the occupational cultures of 
public relations in various cultural settings. Public relations consultants can be regarded 
as members of a particular speech community, which possesses its own ‘commu- 
nicative repertoire, speech event, speech act, shared language attitudes etc.’ (Keating, 
2001: 288) and therefore an appropriate object of study.

We can consider public relations practice as comprising one or more occupational 
cultures, for example ‘consultancy culture’ or ‘in-house culture’ or even more speci- 
fied as in ‘Hill & Knowlton culture’. Within organisational cultures or managerial 
cultures, public relations may be seen as a specific occupational sub- or micro-culture.

Understanding the cultural constraints (sanctions, taboos) of public relations con- 
sultancy and in-house operations, for example in relation to what are considered to 
be appropriate relations between public relations practitioners and journalists, or 
marketers, or the organisational managerial class can explain the relationship between 
public relations and society. It can help elicit how wider cultural and societal con- 
ventions influence the public relations occupation in various contexts as well as shape 
expectations and generate stereotypes or even caricatures.

Ethnographic research can produce empathetic insights and understanding of 
public relations occupational cultures. There is so little flesh on the public relations 
academic skeleton, that we do not even have insight into public relations feasts and 
festivals, either at the organisational level, or at the occupational level (such as award 
ceremonies and annual dinners) or interpretations of the symbolic significance of such 
events. Public relations academics may attend such events and yet are from a different 
culture, which leaves open the way to reflexive auto-ethnography, especially of those 
who have had careers that encompass both cultures. We know nothing of the public 
relations consultant’s culture shock that they may experience moving from organis- 
tional client to organisational client; or their experiences of inevitable organisational 
cultural change.

Public relations in organisational cultures

Anthropological cultural concepts can also be used to interpret the role of public 
relations in a rather different way to the established dichotomy of manager-technician. 
For example, within organisation studies, management consultants have already been
described as ‘witch doctors’. Although this term has fallen into disrepute within anthropology because it ‘combines implications of ignorance and backwardness’ (Stevens, 2006: 2318) it is employed in organisational literature (Clark & Salaman, 1996; Kieser, 1997; Whittle, 2008) so it may be a useful, if rather hostile, metaphor. There is the potential to explore the meaning and role of ‘spin doctor’, the relationship, if any, to ‘witch doctor’ or ‘sorcerer’ and to consider how organisational members view the public relations culture and its celebrants. A deeper understanding of these terms, and their role in cultures may help us to understand the antipathy and fear of ‘spin doctors’. The scientisation of public relations mitigates against the exploration of its mythical and spiritual practices; its meaning-making in organisational cults and its apparently interstitial position between beliefs, values and cultural mythologies. Do non-public relations employees regard public relations as a form of magic? What might this tell us about organisational role and fate of the public relations occupation?

There is a gap in relation to the role that public relations practitioners play within, and on behalf of organisational cultures, not least because one can see them as storytellers and myth-makers, who help to create and maintain organisational rituals employing symbols thought to create unifying meaning (see also both Elmer and Mackey, this volume). Their role is instrumental, but the stuff of their work is necessarily cultural. There are some sticky questions to be answered as to whether in-house public relations practitioners are doing anything more than ‘organisational cultism’, particularly when involved in the popular ‘change management’ programmes, which often seem akin to ‘conversion’. Thus public relations may be connected with spirituality and religion (L’Etang, 2008: 254).

Public relations educational and research cultures

There is the potential to explore ethnographies and auto-ethnographies of scholarship and education – public relations educational cultures. For example, one might reflect on ‘mantras’ of the dominant paradigm (those who based their work on Excellence and ‘the’ four (US) models) and hegemonic implications (Roper, 2005). A classic dualism in public relations education has been that of ‘theory versus practice’, and tensions could be usefully explored through educational ethnographies to explore the initial encounters and subsequent relations between students and academic staff and visiting practitioners. Such studies could provide real insight into the existence and origin of resistances and negotiation over the curriculum. Ethnography, including critical ethnography, could also explore the culture of professional bodies and those that are involved in education.

Conclusion

Anthropological ideas could change the shape of the public relations discipline, its politics and its modernist tendencies. The discipline needs some basic anthropological ethnographic research to provide richer data and to correct the over-reliance on
normative theory and, in the case of international public relations, on Hofstede (L’Etang, 2010). Only in this painstaking way can we begin to piece together the lived experience of public relations cultures and the role of public relations ‘in everyday life’. Detailed descriptive data derived from participant observation and long-term immersion in public relations cultures and contexts can deliver concepts, themes, theories and self-understanding. In short, patient ethnography can help correct the somewhat judgemental prescriptive approaches which have dominated the public relations discipline for too long.

An anthropological ethnographic research agenda should facilitate the research, funding, and publication of ethnographies based on classic participant observation – and the discipline as a whole needs to ensure that the term ‘ethnographic’ is employed in a methodologically accurate way (L’Etang, 2010).

Anthropology offers public relations a route away from simplified structures and processes, and from approaches to culture that seek to reduce it to a series of variables to facilitate quantitative cross-cultural comparisons. It usefully ‘messes things up’ for public relations by foregrounding the notion of context and enabling deeper insights about public relations people, occupational groupings and practices, both ‘professional’ and amateur, and its organisational and societal engagements and impacts.

References and further reading


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PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE POSTMODERN CITY

An ethnographic account of PR occupational culture in Mexico City

Caroline E. M. Hodges

One of the essential ways to understand the dynamics of the work of the new cultural intermediaries and their places in metropolitan society is in-depth research into the lifeworlds of those agents whose work shapes our ways of life and ‘ways of being’.

(Wright, 2005: 107)

The city as a site of transformation and the emergent forms of life within it have attracted researchers from anthropology to human geography; yet there has been little, if any, research which considers public relations activity in particular cities (see Bruning, Langenhop & Green, 2004). Cities offer new opportunities for exploring the purpose, constraints and potential of public relations as a socio-cultural practice. In particular, when studying the occupational cultures of public relations – the ways in which practitioners live, create and relate to the world of public relations work and the occupational values, visions and assumptions, experiences and identities that shape their work behaviour (Hodges, 2006a) – scholars would do well to take into account urban differences. There will be a ‘metropolitan habitus’ (attitudes, beliefs, feelings and identities) in large capital cities which may distinguish public relations ‘culture’ here from PR ‘cultures’ in urban areas elsewhere in the country. This habitus will be ‘nuanced by individual strategies for negotiating the boundaries between the global and the local’ (Butler, 2007: 142, 2002), the indigenous and the postmodern.

Today’s global cities bring diverse groups of strangers together. The explosion in availability and provision of new communication technology alongside other contemporary forms of mediation have contributed to the shifting of existing patterns of social relations, offering new opportunities for individual and communal life. Viewing the city through a postmodern lens, which sees the truth as socially constructed, allows us to understand how people’s lives are patterned geographically and discursively, and how everyday life activity (at home, at work and in the community) can transform the meaning of our identities (Tajbakhsh, 2000). To understand how
public relations practitioners contribute to the economic and cultural life of the postmodern city, researchers would explore how they work and the meanings they associate with the professional activities they perform. Studies would consider how practitioners conceptualise and practice public relations across various locales, markets, institutions, communities, public spaces, discourses and social networks (Tajbakhsh, 2000: 1); how they navigate the circuits of culture and power (Curtin and Gaither, 2005); and how they participate in the possibilities offered by complex relational systems.

This chapter offers a unique perspective on public relations in Mexico City. Based on an ethnographic study conducted between 2004 and 2006, I will consider the meanings that public relations practitioners associated with the occupation’s intermediary role and how they ‘made use of social networks to help them negotiate their way through the potentially hostile waters’ of living in one of the largest cities in the world (Butler, 2007: 146; Garcia Canclini, 1995). The core themes to emerge from the qualitative data will be discussed within the particular context of Latin American postmodern urban society. Before discussing public relations in Mexico City, I will outline the general position of public relations practitioners in ‘the postmodern city’ and go on to explore the Latin American discourse of postmodernism and to consider, specifically, Mexico City as a site of fragmentation, chaos and hope (Garcia Canclini, 1995).

**Public relations in ‘the postmodern city’**

Through their position as cultural intermediaries, public relations practitioners are involved in the construction of knowledge about ‘the city’. In her work on the fashionable quarters of the post-industrial city of Milan, Laura Bovone (2005: 359–80) suggests that through the products and services they offer, cultural intermediaries are able to establish links between their own identities and experiences and those of consumers. The ‘new’ cultural intermediaries, for Bovone, are not necessarily Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) ‘intermediaries of the ruling class taste’ but are ‘in general, transmitters of culture, who work on the transformation of meanings for a larger public’ (362). Public relations can be understood within this context as a cultural practice that forms part of the communicative processes by which a city constructs its social reality (Banks, 1995; Hodges 2006a; Hodges & Daymon, 2009). As cultural intermediaries, public relations practitioners use their personal lives and tastes – particularly their own experiences as communicators and ‘consumers’ of communicative practices, as crucial occupational resources (Bourdieu, 1984: 365). The working lives of practitioners often blur with their lives outside of work, and many believe their own lifestyles important to create the authority and authenticity necessary for the messages they promote and the organisations they represent to be perceived as credible (Smith Maguire, 2008: 219).

Due to their position as ‘bridges’ between organisations and their publics, PR practitioners are required to ‘embody the values they [are] charged with imparting’ (Smith Maguire, 2008: 220). The real contact they have with the consumers of their messages and services enables practitioners to accumulate social capital – that is, the
actual and potential resources based on trust that can be mobilised through social relations and networks of individuals and organisations (Smith Maguire, 2008; Wright, 2005). This capital, in turn, facilitates the flow and exchange of ideas and experiences. The ‘mediating’ work of public relations also involves cultural factors such as communication, relationship building and the ‘service-oriented ethic’ (Moor, 2008: 211) where the possibility of symbolic reward is perceived to be as significant as the benefits of financial reward (Wright, 2005: 116). PR practitioners through their own symbolic work have the potential to contribute to the transformation of ‘the city’ through the narratives, imageries and rhetorical frameworks they present (Erni, 2007: 5–6). Yet the potential in today’s cities for practitioners as cultural intermediaries facilitating dialogue, exchange of ideas and opinions, and building connections remains largely under-explored (Edwards, 2009).

PR practitioners will be ‘particular kinds of people with particular orientations to the social world’ (Wright, 2005: 107). Scholars would be wise, therefore, to employ a broader and more nuanced understanding of mediation that takes into account the variation in practice both within and across geographical borders (Cronin, 2004: 352); applying interpretive and ethnographic approaches to consider the pieces of culture that practitioners bring together (societal culture, occupational culture and organisational culture), the ways in which they communicate with those they come into contact with in their daily working lives, and the relationship between their lives outside of work and their professional lifeworlds (Bovone, 2005; Hodges, 2006a). Research of this nature places particular importance on the lived experiences of practitioners and focuses on their discursive meaning making – their values, visions and achievements, as well as their stories of how their occupational and social roles are played out in practice, and their imaginings of the future (Serini, 1994: 55; Pieczka, 2002; Filby & Willmott, 1988; Hodges, 2006a).

The general approach described here so far would require contextualisation depending on where in the world it was applied. This chapter focuses on public relations in a postmodern city in Latin America and the following intellectual understanding of postmodern society is, therefore, relevant.

Utopia revisited: a Latin American postmodern orientation

A theme that has run through much Latin American academic discourse in the social sciences and humanities is that communally oriented traditions should be valued and that a prosperous future for the region depends on linking these traditions to modern development. Due to the region’s unique place in the trajectory of modernity, we can see re-articulations of elements that in other contexts have previously been separated: ‘the happiness of collective solidarity; [alongside] the adventure of complete individual self fulfilment’ (Quijano, 1993: 154). Latin American postmodern philosophy has been heavily influenced by two further intellectual currents which emerged in the region during the 1960s – the ‘theory of dependence’, which rejects the dominant view of the time that less developed countries were little more than primitive societies whose reliance on advanced capitalist nations was the root cause of their underdevelopment,
and the ‘theory of liberation’, which seeks freedom from new neoliberal forms of
‘colonisation’ and a long-standing tradition of corrupt public institutions and unequal
distribution of resources. Postmodernism in Latin America is, therefore, a discourse
that has tended to ‘look forward, firmly embedded in the utopian function of
thought, in future-oriented discourse and aspirations for a better life’ (Castro-Gómez,

The ‘end of utopias’ emphasised in Western postmodernism (Jacoby, 2000; Jameson,
1991) does not, for Latin American thinkers, mean the demise of the utopian dimension
but rather, argues Néstor García Canclini (2001: 151), ‘the rewriting and reinterpre-
ting of old utopias according to the new needs of contemporary Latin American
society’. The masses are seeking ways to build new ‘social practices founded on
reciprocity, on an assumption of equality, on collective solidarity, and at the same
time on the freedom of individual choice and on a democracy of collectively made
decisions, against all external impositions’ (Quijano, 1993: 154). From this perspec-
tive, one of the main concerns for public relations as a cultural intermediary occu-
pation would be the reconfiguration of social relations through emergent forms of
mediation and the (re)conceptualisation and ‘repackaging’ of utopian thinking to
promote the exercise of citizenship via more equal access to information, the com-
munication and exercising of rights and promotional efforts which play to desires for
re-iterations of community.

**Mexico City – a postmodern ‘megalopolis’**

Mexico City is more than just a postmodern city, it is a postmodern megalopolis;
with a population predicted by some to grow to around 50 million during the first
few decades of the twenty-first century (Preston and Dillon, 2004: 479). This frag-
mented city weaves the traditional and contemporary; a cultural bricolage of indi-
genous folklore thrives amid the chaos of this modern city (Gallo, 2004: 6–7). On
workdays it is difficult to escape the noise, oppressive smog, severe traffic congestion
and the personal stress this stimulates. Imprisoned within a valley by a fortress of
mountains and the imposing Popocatépetl volcano, Mexico City has become a city of
further fragmentation, boundaries and division. This has promoted the development
of guarded and gated communities in some parts of the city while elsewhere others
live in make-shift housing without access to clean water and basic services (Pacione,
2009: 65; Soja, 2000).

The aesthetic regeneration of certain neighbourhoods towards the centre and
south of the city in order to create fashionable quarters has impacted on the rituals of
daily life in which traditional face-to-face communities created around the structure
of dwellings and public spaces such as ‘plazas’ and parks helped to establish steady
social relations. Despite this, feelings of community are able to exist temporarily in
the solidarity of groups of people (family, friends, barrio – neighbourhood) during
celebrations and rituals or in a shared concern about the degradation of the urban
experience in Mexico City (Garcia Canclini, 1995). For example, *la fiesta*, a term
traditionally understood as religious celebration and increasingly used in its literal
translation, ‘the party’, to refer to nights out with friends, appears to serve as a form of collective therapy for reducing the strains and stresses of everyday life (Daymon & Hodges, 2008: 7).

It is not surprising, however, that anthropological studies have suggested that inhabitants of Mexico City find it hard to identify and to take part in the city as an entire community (Garcia Canclini, 2001: 61) and that discourses of life in the city emphasise utopian ideas as a ‘coping strategy’ to deal with living in the globalising metropolis. The concept of the community as facilitator of social relations and provider of leisure is becoming lost (ibid.). Instead, the blurring of boundaries between the social, cultural, political and economic has led to the ‘colonization of lifeworld experiences by the hyper real’ (Borges, 2001: 25). This occurs through work done by the new cultural intermediary occupations, such as public relations, who contribute to the social construction of life in the city by influencing rituals of work and leisure, how Mexicans present themselves, are perceived by society, and engage with politics (Pacione, 2009: 64–65; see also L’Etang, this volume, for a discussion of PR’s role in this respect).

The political ‘challenge’ in Mexico during the first decade of the twenty-first century, for example, has been to build the foundations for democracy (Levy & Bruhn, 2001). Kirschke (2001: 4) suggests that this is a process of ‘learning new values, identities and political strategies that might enable groups and individuals to create and sustain a new way of life and new institutions in order to organise society’. The concept of ‘family’, Mexico’s most important institution and at the heart of its social structure, has featured strongly in political rhetoric during the last decade, with campaign references made to ‘Todos somos México’ (‘We are all Mexico’) or ‘México, somos una familia’ (‘Mexico, we are a family’). Mexican society is guided by this orientation and increasing references to the family in political and organisational rhetoric, often produced by PR practitioners, have served to present an integrated vision of Mexico City, distracting attention from what many perceive to be undemocratic practices and persuading people of the ‘good works’ being carried out by dominant political, social or commercial institutions.

Mexico City is, therefore, a rich environment in which to explore public relations as a cultural intermediary that seeks to facilitate dialogue and build connections (Edwards, 2009).

**Relaciones Humanas: a utopian ethos of PR in Mexico City**

The ethnographic account that follows seeks to conceptualise the world of public relations through the lens of the practitioners to ‘tell the story’ of the lifeworlds (habitus, experiences, identities and relationships) of PR practitioners in Mexico City. It is based on data gathered from in-depth interviews with 33 public relations practitioners, informal interviews with practitioners at professional social events and ‘dislocated’ participant observations (for a detailed account of the fieldwork see Daymon & Hodges, 2009, 2008). The key themes discussed here are derived from the specific context of Mexico City, as described earlier: practitioner experiences of
social fragmentation in Mexico City; their attempts to repackage utopian thought in order to play to the desires for reiterations of community; and their efforts to promote public relations as a facilitator of dialogue that generates ways of thinking and being which emphasise both collective solidarity and individual self-fulfilment (Quijano, 1993).

The discursive meaning of PR in Mexico City is espoused in an occupational ethos of ‘relaciones humanas’ (Hodges, 2006b: 180): ‘an ethos of human and democratic communication, manifested in an authentic occupational “character” and formal and informal interpersonal communicative practices, which places an emphasis on building trusted relationships and valuing persons’. The key word here is ‘ethos’. As several of the practitioners emphasised, it is sometimes difficult to uphold one’s ethics in a country that has suffered so many brisk political and social changes; it often calls for improvisation.

During my time in Mexico City, I met a retired practitioner Lupita,1 who was still actively involved in the industry; public relations was her life. For Lupita, business was all about relationships with people. We sat in a café on the corner of a quiet square one day when she commented about our surroundings. There we were, she said, in a typical little Mexican café. It was a comfortable place and was communicating a certain message. Lupita then compared it to a restaurant overflowing with people. That (emphasis added), would be communicating something quite different. She considered this to be like the personality of every person and, as Lupita told me, that was something I had to learn.

If you don’t understand people, how are you going to be able to communicate? If we all knew how to communicate better and to adapt ourselves to understanding others, everything would be different; we can impose our own desires on others without thinking about the other person and what the other person wants [...]

(Lupita)

Lupita believed strongly in the relational elements of public relations work and the need for practitioners to respect the uniqueness of the individual, regardless of where they were from or what group(s) they belonged to. She went on to talk about the obvious class divide in Mexico City and her frustration with people who would not move beyond certain areas of the city. She had met people who were afraid to go into the centre, saying, ‘What’s for me there?’ Lupita, instead, believed in people who would be as comfortable going to Santa Fe (a fashionable district in the city’s peripheries) as to Tepito (a downtown, market area close to the historic centre).

An emphasis on communication for collective solidarity and the importance of recognising the uniqueness and freedom of the individual (Quijano, 1993: 154) was not only communicated through the narrative experiences of the older generation, but also it formed part of the narratives of the younger practitioners. Gabriela (Gaby), an agency account manager in her early thirties, commented that every morning she liked to personally say ‘good morning’ to each of her colleagues to feel what mood they were in. Gaby believed this was important in order to begin a productive
working day. She suggested that working in public relations was a way of life and that her work had taught her to recognise the individual strengths in everyone. She believed that everyone around her enriched her in some way – her colleagues, clients, even people she met crossing the street.

The relationships you build at work have to be just as good as those you have outside of work. It would be kind of strange if I left my ‘communication skills’ in the office at the end of each day and forgot all about them once I was out in the real world. You can’t work as a PR practitioner and yet, as soon as you leave the office, change character completely – like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Above all, it is important to be genuine because at the end of the day if anything is artificial, it shows.

(Gaby)

PR practitioners in Mexico City employed a range of cultural and symbolic forms of capital – a capacity to define and legitimise cultural, moral and aesthetic values and to understand and manipulate meanings (Butler, 2007: 141; Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; see also Edwards, Chapter 4, this volume). These had their foundations in Mexico City’s cultural and social capital. This involved ‘transforming contingent relations, such as those of neighbourhood, the workplace, or even kinship, into relationships that are at once necessary and elective, implying durable obligations subjectively felt (feelings of gratitude, respect, friendship, etc.)’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 249–50). From a Mexican perspective, accumulation of social capital would be dependent on one’s position within the social hierarchy which is in turn determined by both class and the extent of palanca that is held (Daymon & Hodges, 2009b: 430–31). Palanca describes the power that comes from networks of interpersonal connections which cover family, social and work life (ibid.).

The foundations upon which public relations work rests are economic, political, as well as a cultural and this raises questions of trust and authenticity (Bovone 2005: 372). The PR practitioners in this study drew on their own experiences and believed that their cultural and social capital and lifestyles were a significant factor in creating authority and authenticity for the messages they promoted (Bovone 2005: 372; Smith Maguire, 2008). Due to their position as ‘bridges’ between organisations and the publics, practitioners communicated a need to embody the values they were responsible for communicating (Smith Maguire: 220). An ability to cultivate confianza, ‘the feeling of trust, interpersonal closeness and a commitment to shared effects in the future, based on a similarity of worldview and derived from common experience’ (Archer & Fitch, 1994: 86), through interpersonal influence and communicating an authentic character was, they believed, central to their effectiveness as professional communicators.

In accordance with the spirit of Latin American postmodernism, as well as the Mexican cultural orientation towards politeness and face-saving, public relations practitioners emphasised respect of otherness and stressed the importance of personal identity and the need to guard one’s privacy (Lindsley & Braithwaite, 1996; Bartra, 1992). When I asked Gaby about her ethics as a practitioner and whether she had any
companies in mind that she could not work with, she answered that she could not work with anyone who would try to manipulate the way of thinking of people and their ways of behaving. Gaby could not work for anyone who would invade someone’s personal space, their own personal identity – whether within an organisation, a group of friends or a community. ‘If they wanted to do that […] then we would stop being Patricia, or Susana or Juana and we would become a computer […] Computers are very intelligent, but they don’t feel, they don’t cry.’ Sometimes, Gaby believed, ‘public relations agencies in Mexico might not be completely up-to-date with technology, but they wanted to continue to listen and to attend to the needs of people.’

The forms of capital these practitioners drew on were not dissimilar to the resources of ‘personal service workers and aesthetic labourers: personality, demeanour, appearance etc.’ (Smith Maguire, 2008: 214). Practitioners communicated their social awareness, narratives of relationship management and orientation towards collective solidarity. They were characterised by expressive styles of self-work ethic (Heelas, 2002: 79–80), which regards the self at work as something much ‘deeper’ and more natural; borne out through particular integrations of work, family and a sense of Mexican identity. ‘Una publirrelacionista nace, no se hace’ was a phrase several respondents repeated to me, which suggests that public relations practitioners are born, not made. An effective practitioner would be a ‘Don/ña de gente’, an expression used to describe a person who combines a natural flair for communication with an interest in people and would draw on their own innate talent for public relations rather than a learned skill.

For PR practitioners in Mexico, how trust and authenticity are understood will be shaped by history. Corruption has long been an everyday fact of life throughout the country:

[T]he ‘system’ was in place for at least a century and blossomed under seventy-one years of [PRI, i.e. Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party)] rule … The sins range from small bribes, called ‘mordidas’ (the bite), to fixing traffic tickets, to widespread and megadollar graft at the highest levels of government.

(Long, 2004: 59)

Public relations in Mexico City grew out of this ‘system’ and traditionally involved developing influential personal relationships between business leaders and politicians. Public fatigue with such corruption promoted a change in Mexico’s presidency in 2000, after more than 70 years of one-party rule. Professional narratives have since transformed to emphasise the public relations practitioner as a facilitator of open, transparent and authentic communication and to encourage a view of the occupation as one that: ‘builds bridges, makes links and overcomes obstacles’ (CONFIARP 2004: 90).

Practitioners emphasised the expressive and relational elements of their work in an attempt to combine tradition with the present. They defined and constructed their aspiration for authentic communication in terms of a commodification of the past.
Clusters of practitioners equated public relations with natural forms of communication, referring to it as ‘relaciones humanas’ and believing that public relations was practised by all human beings. They suggested that its roots could be traced back to ‘Huehuetlatolli’, meaning ‘ancient word’ or ‘words of the elder’, a rhetorical device associated with Nahuatl (Mexico) people and the elders in Nahuatl society who acted as patrons of community interaction (or mediators) and whose responsibility it was to pass on ethical values and wisdom (Sullivan, 1974; Blythin, 1990). As Kirschke (2001: 4) argues, the current political transition towards democracy is a process of ‘learning new values, identities’. Practitioners believed that they operated as cultural agents with a responsibility to help publics understand how to think and feel about the political and social transition (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2009). Manuel, who worked for a government ministry, stated: ‘[T]he key is to empathise with what is going on and understand it is part of an evolution.’ It could be argued that practitioners undertaking such activities were engaging in the commodification of democracy, or democratic values, and that their occupational values espoused a new kind of utopia – an ideal or imagined community.

As described above, in Mexico City the concept of ‘the family’ plays a central role in building trust. Familism, a social orientation in which the needs of the family are more important than those of the individual; paternalism, an attitude that suggests that subordinates should be led and managed in a fatherly way, benevolently and often intrusively, ‘for their own good’; and particularism, dedication to one’s in-group, have long been considered resources for building social capital and public relations practitioners would seek to employ a range of personal skills to inspire colleagues to work together towards common goals and to build trust (Bovone, 2005: 377). Hector, an agency director, believed that public relations was about transmitting one’s own values. On a personal level, it was like looking after one’s own family. Hector regarded his agency as an extension of his family and believed that in his agency everyone lived as a family unit. As a director, Hector believed, your ‘family’ would always be your first responsibility: ‘When you look after your own, your client, whoever it may be, will know that you are going to look after them.’ Hector believed that personal involvement and a familiar approach would increase the level of trust that the client had in his agency.

The public relations practitioners believed they were able to effectively manage personal, social and environmental change by realistically and flexibly coping with the immediate situation. They communicated a sense of service and cooperativeness (Argyle, 1994), an ability to take into account the needs and wants of others (clients, colleagues, neighbours, etc.). Those practitioners in senior positions, in particular, articulated an enthusiasm for a shared utopian vision and mission – to share information, facilitate dialogue and encourage transparency. Looking towards the future, they thought of themselves as ‘cultural mediators’ believing that they had the potential to facilitate communication and understanding (Taft, 1981) and could ‘transform meanings by moving them from one context to another’ (Bovone, 2005: 370), adapting them to a range of publics within the city. At a local level, they believed that they had to lead by example. As Pepe, Director of Social
Communication within a government ministry, suggested: ‘[T]he public [or civil] servants … one way or another, we are a visible figure … There are lots of people who know you and who watch how you act so … for me, throughout my life I have tried to set an example … ‘

When reflecting on the social role of public relations, Irma, an independent consultant commented:

[T]he reason you dedicate yourself to public relations is that … I think it’s a social job … we have a social role to play. And in my case … this is something that I had always looked for … to do something with contact with other people, Erm … to be a bridge.

(Irma)

A number of practitioners shared stories about occasions when they had been able to use their ‘PR skills’ to assist others. Some of the veteran practitioners, for example, recounted experiences of the earthquake of 1985, which virtually destroyed the centre of the city. As Marta, a consultant with extensive in-house experience in the hospitality industry told me:

I put a ‘PR office’ out there on the pavement to deal with all relatives who feared that their loved ones had been lost. We put up a tent and put out some sandwiches, drinks and chairs, because people were beginning to get desperate with how slow the rescue effort was shaping up [ … ] These are the ways in which we [public relations practitioners] can support the community [ … ]

(Marta)

These stories form part of a broader discourse, a discourse of ‘imaginary wholeness’ constructed by the media and communications industries in Mexico City to suggest that the city is ‘able to exist for a few moments in the solidarity of people after an earthquake, during certain celebrations, or in a shared concern about the environment’ (Garcia Canclini, 1995: 752).

Despite articulating an enthusiasm for the human face of public relations as a bridge and facilitator of dialogue, the redefinition of the urban experience and the impact of shifting of social relations in the city were noticeable in the everyday lifeworlds of practitioners. The majority emphasised the affects of worsening traffic congestion throughout the city upon their daily working lives. They increasingly relied on e-mail and mobile phones as they found themselves unable to attend meetings outside of the office due to the amount of time that this would take up. The typical Mexican comida (lunch), at one time the heart of Mexican daily life, was now less significant as many practitioners disliked the amount of time that it took up in the working day. Instead, they preferred to go out to the nearest Starbucks (or other US ‘themed’ coffee houses) or to ‘order in’ salads, sushi or sandwiches. These trends, it might be argued, reflect a dehumanising of the work experience of practitioners and a depersonalisation of the service that they are able to give as professionals.
Conclusion

Postmodernism in Latin America is a discourse that has tended to ‘look forward, firmly embedded in the utopian function of thought, in future-oriented discourse and aspirations for a better life’ (Castro-Gómez, 2001: 129). The occupational culture of public relations in Mexico City reflects this discourse. It was founded upon a set of espoused values, which rested on an ethos of social citizenship, rituals of social cohesion and attempts by practitioners to humanise the business, political and social spheres in which they moved. The occupational ethos was oriented towards people rather than tasks, where communication and encounter would be central to their work relationships (Smith, 1992). These public relations professionals thought of themselves as ‘therapeutic’ individuals (Richards & Brown, 2002: 110) who, guided by a utopian vision, had the potential to make things better in a pragmatic and focused way. Through their professional networks and social liaisons, they believed they could facilitate the flow of information between people who may not otherwise communicate with one another. The practitioners’ reflexivity illustrated a tendency to construct an imagined reality based on their perceptions of how things ‘ought to be’. The narrative experiences of public relations practitioners in Mexico City reflect a surface utopian desire; a discourse that is constructed to conform to utopian principles, while the deep structures of institutions and laws which shape society remain unchanged (Eaton, 2002).

It might be argued that the experience of interacting with and being interviewed by a young novice British researcher encouraged some practitioners to speak through masks (Jameson, 1991) and to engage in such utopian-inspired discourses, taking ‘a somewhat promotional or evangelical tone when discussing their work’ (Moor, 2008: 410) in an effort to convince me of the significance of PR in Mexican society. Bourdieu (2000: 366) suggests that the new cultural intermediary ‘professions’ have developed a language of justification for their commercial practices and social role. In this context, the justification was of public relations as a mediating force in the transition towards a more ‘open’, ‘transparent’, ‘dialogic’ and ‘authentic’ experience. As Bovone (2005: 372) suggests, ‘a diffused feeling of community belonging is determinant for good performance of economic organisation’. In Mexico City, PR practitioners were aware of the relational aspects of their work and of the resources they possessed and invested in them. In such a large city, the PR work that highlights the acts of high profile government figures and other leading authorities, and the discourses of the media would bring together ‘in imaginary wholeness the dispersed fragments of the urban fabric’ (Garcia Canclini, 1995: 752) to engage in the recycling and repacking of ‘community’ for contemporary consumption.

This chapter has applied an ethnographic approach to explore public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in postmodern Mexico City. It does not propose to offer a precise analysis of the nature of practitioners’ mediating role or the multiple forms of mediation that co-exist within the practice of public relations in a postmodern city; after all, practitioners experienced only fragments of the city. In reading the account, we should be cautious in our assumptions about just how much
influence these ‘middle class’ cultural intermediaries have on consumer dispositions and ways of living and being (Moor, 2008: 424; Wright, 2005: 115; Nixon & Du Gay, 2002). Within a city such as Mexico City, with entrenched social disparity and where ‘palanca’ is so deeply embedded within the culture, public relations practitioners may be unable to see beyond their own ‘networks’ or ‘in groups’. Insofar as they are able to empathise and connect with their publics, this may be limited to those who share their experiences and access to social and cultural capital (Moor, 2008: 424; Butler, 2007).

These limitations aside, the account offers a rich insight into the discursive meaning making and personal motivations of a group of public relations practitioners in Mexico City, and demonstrates how urban life in the capital affects the sense making and day-to-day rituals of work for these practitioners. There is currently a dearth of detailed ethnographic accounts of public relations and reflective life stories of practitioners within our cities and the potential for future research into public relations activity here is rich. Further contributions to our existing knowledge are urgently needed to fully appreciate public relations as a socio-cultural practice and the possibilities for practitioners as ‘new’ cultural intermediaries (see also both Elmer and L’Etang, this volume). The next challenge will be to combine our understandings of the ethos of public relations occupational culture(s) with more in-depth understandings of the social and cultural influences of the practice in metropolitan society.

Note

1 All names have been changed to protect the identities of practitioners.

References and further reading


Public relations is storytelling. The statement is not, if we take it at face value, controversial. A simple lay explanation of what public relations practitioners do all day would certainly include telling stories. If we extend our interest to elaborated, theorised versions of this commonsense view, we encounter terms such as sense-making, narrative and discursive practice, which all engage with the notion of telling stories. More specifically, this involves public relations workers who tell stories that support their employer’s interests, in ways that make profitable sense. While journalists might make strident and confident claims for the cultural centrality of their labour, and movie producers may ascribe lofty artistic intentions to their daily bread, we may still recognise a family resemblance that links such work together with public relations as storytelling occupations. Why, then, do accounts of public relations fail to make much mention of it? Perhaps because the term storytelling offers a single but imprecise term under which a confusing range of approaches have come together, in an apparently haphazard way, within a larger and more inclusive category of narrative. This chapter brings together a selection of that material in order to offer some further points of departure to scholars as they explore public relations practices, and reflects the importance of discourse, as discussed in the introduction.

In this chapter we encounter storytelling within two quite different bodies of theory: one founded on management theory; and the other which prioritises sociological and cultural analysis. Both provide rich accounts of work and organisational life. The first arises from an interest in management and organisations, located in a tradition of explorations and explanations that bring tools of social enquiry to the business school agenda. This is the study of organisations and people in organisations that may well be familiar territory to public relations scholars working from a business school perspective. Management theorists have drawn on storytelling approaches, including both folkloric and literary accounts of story, in a variety of ways; Yiannis Gabriel, for example, has used storytelling as a methodological approach to fieldwork,
as well as an analytical tool (Gabriel, 2000). For public relations scholars this opens up greater possibilities for drawing on the stories that practitioners tell, about themselves, their work, their organisations, their clients and working relationships, as a potentially rich source of information about the occupation (see also Hodges, this volume).

Other management theorists have also subjected practices and organisations to critiques that draw on storytelling in other ways, not to collect stories, but to identify storytelling in use and to subject organisational activities to a storied analysis (Czarniawska, 1998; Boje, 2007). There is also a more recent trend to engage literary theory; delegates at management conferences have occasionally found Derrida, Bakhtin and Foucault harnessed roughly to accounts of business and organisational life, and while that line of work is relatively immature as yet, it may offer scope for future scholarship in public relations, too. These approaches reveal the potential for public relations analysis to extend beyond its existing, familiar, and well-worn terms of reference to develop alternative analytical frameworks and an expanded range of explanations.

As illustrated in the previous two chapters, the sociological contribution arises from close scholarly interest in people and practices. It is only in the past decade that the critical emphasis in public relations studies has begun to shift away from the functional and manageralist perspectives that dominated the discipline from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, and towards explanations of public relations that arise from its social and cultural context. Having arrived rather late to the game, public relations scholars find themselves at a particular moment in relation to sociological and cultural theory; the explanatory power and grand sweep of critical theory has passed its peak, so that it is no longer adequate to rely on critical abstractions that draw together whole classes or groups as if they were all the same. The past 15 years have generated several such accounts of public relations, including those which draw together complex and diverse factors under the popular but imprecise term ‘spin’, while they fail to engage with the precise detail of working lives of public relations practitioners (Miller & Dinan, 2007). Such approaches have now passed the peak of their popularity, amid growing concern that they conceal the differentiated ways that practice, relationship and culture emerge in work and workers (Du Gay, 2007; Nixon, 2003). As a result, there is a shift away from theory that interrogates culture and economy in order to explain the nature of contemporary capitalism (as in Giddens, 1991; and Lash & Urry; 1994) and towards critique at the level of occupations and personhood. If sociological work is now carried out in a period when the explanatory and structuring power of critical theory is on the wane, attention falls instead on competing explanations and modes of enquiry, and in particular on a sociology that focuses on the specific and contingent nature of people and their practices within a distinctive occupational culture (Du Gay, 2007; Nixon, 2003). Such analysis is based on an anthropologically inflected sociology, especially that of Bourdieu (see also both Edwards and L’Etang, this volume). This emerging strand of research and scholarship amounts to a modest sociological turn in the study of public relations.

If we re-examine public relations work from the perspective of individual practices and working cultures, storytelling emerges as one of several routines that animate
working lives. On an intuitive level this may be unremarkable, but reaching a scholarly understanding of this requires us to overcome both the historical lack of engagement with storytelling within public relations studies, and a fragmented and diverse theoretical framework on the topic that derives from social and cultural critique.

Exploring that framework engages with the problems of language and power, with the relationship between story and social life, and with the role of storyteller. There are several key distinctions to encounter. Most authors seek formal and structural distinctions between story and narrative (the two are sometimes used interchangeably elsewhere, but have become established as quite separate terms in this context), between the immediacy of story creation and storied post hoc analysis, between emotion and reason, between dominant forms of knowledge and their disruptive alternatives, between complete stories that make sense of our world, and fragmented stories that seem only to emphasize its incoherence. They are occasionally presented as binary oppositions, although it may be more useful to view them from the outset as structures that authors have engaged as they try to make sense of the world by imposing a sense of formal unity. They are contrasted with claims that are more constructivist in tone, suggesting that life is rather messy and that the stories we find reflect that messiness; that storytelling is polyvocal, that social life is characterised by diverse intentions, and that there are limits to what can be discovered by reasoned critique. To encounter such variety of approach it is not necessary to leave the management school, only to explore its furthest corridors.

The management school

Three authors have dominated the contribution from within management scholarship: Yiannis Gabriel, David Boje and Barbara Czarniawska. They draw attention to the idea that organisational life is characterised by a quest for meaning, so that the consumption and production of stories seem integral to our attempts both to organise and make sense of organisational life (Weick, 2001).

Gabriel’s approach to storytelling is purist in tone; he remains closest to the folkloric oral tradition, in which stories arise and are recounted face to face, performed spontaneously and creatively as a cultural form that transmits and interprets the culture of an organisation, and which has an important role as entertainment. His emphasis on spontaneity reflects the interests of a scholar who prioritises storytelling above narrative, and leads him to view managed, planned storytelling (and by implication, public relations work) with suspicion, suggesting that stories are ‘particularly dangerous devices when in the hands of image-makers, hoaxes, spin-doctors and fantasists’ (Gabriel, 2004: 19). This suspicion extends to the growing claims of management researchers, suggesting that stories have been used instrumentally, for example in knowledge-gathering exercises, in pursuit of organisational learning, in the construction of management expertise, as well as in envisioning and managing change, where large scale storytelling programmes (such as those at IBM and Shell) have been celebrated as attempts to institutionalise – that is, capture and own – storied knowledge (Denning, 2001, Simmons, 2002).
Gabriel’s insistence on traditional storytelling competence emphasises storytelling as a creative act, one that requires access to a set of techniques and the ability to access particular types of knowledge. The approach is tinged with nostalgia, and echoes the literary theorist Walter Benjamin who suggested that narrative competence is in historical decline due to the rise of privatised living, the diverse nature of mass media and the declining value of experience (Benjamin, 1968). This, in turn, raises the question of where that competence is found, and how it is created and sustained in society. These are the problems of social reproduction and the sociology of work, towards which we turn in the final part of this chapter.

For Gabriel, a story is not merely an arrangement of experience in such a way that it makes sense, but it possesses a normatively defined set of characteristics. He is especially enthusiastic that stories should have beginnings and endings, plots and characters, and be performed with emotion in the narrator and audience. Telling a story involves the poetic elaboration of symbolic material which may be drawn from experience, or perhaps from the experience of having heard previous stories (Gabriel, 2000: 239). However, the story does not have to be true in order to be believable. It may be ‘indifferent to extralingual reality’ (Bruner, 1990: 67) and the structure of a false story is no different to the structure of a true one. It need only be able to convey facts as experience (Benjamin, 1968). However, even if fictitious, Gabriel suggests that a story is not ‘just fictitious’ but is ‘at once meaningful and verisimilar’, and in that regard is distinguishable from chronicle, report and myth (Gabriel, 2004: 20).1 This leads him to criticise both Boje (2001) and Czarniawska (1997) for their use of a wide variety of narrative fragments (Gabriel, 2000: 21).

Gabriel, then, establishes quite demanding benchmarks for storytelling that public relations work, with its managerial purpose, usually fails to meet, since both the stories and the act of storytelling will frequently fall outside such tightly defined criteria. While Gabriel does not dismiss organisational stories that include ‘great achievements, missions successfully accomplished, or crisis successfully overcome … dedicated employees, effective managers and heroic leaders’ (Gabriel, 2000: 3), his clear preference is for those that arise within an expression of the diversity of organisational life. His main influence has been to raise interest in story as a means of researching counter-cultures in organisations, by collecting and classifying such stories and using them to interpret organisational culture and the experiences of workers.

Under this analysis, public relations acts of managed communication appear as the background against which storied alternatives are generated, and analysis of these spontaneous performances. Analysis may involve philology, linguistics, semiotic analysis (paying close attention to text, words, the performance of language or the symbolic meanings attached to words, respectively) or the study of plots, characters and symbolism. A strict application of Gabriel’s approach to public relations would lead us to explore the stories told by practitioners about themselves, about each other, about their clients and their work, and would therefore provide close accounts of public relations practices. The focus of this type of analysis would be on storytelling as a feature of organisational culture rather than, for example, the narrative told by a practitioner when pitching a story to a journalist, which may be spontaneous but is
too clearly purposive to meet Gabriel’s criteria. However, for public relations scholars such stories could inform us about the ways that practitioners are socialised, and how they learn to adopt the values, expressions and dispositions of the workplace. Such stories could also help us to gain understandings of occupational cultures, gender, ethnicity and social class. The storytelling methodology could also be used within accounts of the failure of managed communication, either in organisational contexts (internal communication) or planned campaigns. Problems (both practical and ethical) of data collection remain, but such accounts could provide a refreshing change of emphasis from the myth of manageability that underpins many public relations case studies. Against such rich suggestions of possibility, the method is inductive and therefore it would be impossible to guarantee any particular topic before fieldwork. It seems best suited to long term research where the researcher has a well-developed ability to access cultural and organisational meanings.

The folkloric notion of a story that is developed and re-enlivened by subsequent re-tellings is carried forward in David Boje’s work, which introduces the notion of the ‘living story’ as a narrative that need not be re-told face to face, but may be a corporate story, and may be told in video, photos or other media as well as in text (Boje, 2007: 331). Like Gabriel, Boje privileges story and storytelling over narrative, but whereas Gabriel argues that stories arise from social interplay, Boje suggests that they are systematic, that is, they arise from system complexity, and as a result Boje’s critical force is directed more towards structural inequalities, which individual stories illuminate and reify. While Boje’s analysis has rested at the organisational level rather than the individual, this approach might open up a new perspective on public relations practice, offering a storytelling approach to the skills and techniques involved in developing credible organisational narratives over time.

Boje, like Gabriel, remains sensitive to storytelling as a complex task, even as he acknowledges its managerial focus in organisational life. While he recognises that stories may emerge as fragmentary, he suggests that successful storytelling is not achieved by broadcasting a crafted performance by a CEO, for example, but that good storytelling skills require a sophisticated grasp of the system and context, since organisational storytelling is a socio-economic act of performance. So Boje remains, on the one hand, close to the storytelling tradition and, on the other, he both recognises and critiques stories that arise from resolutely organisational and systematic processes. A story does not have to be complete, nor face to face; under this analysis it may be co-constructed, fragmented, and created from various elements such as images, texts, performances and so on. Unlike Gabriel, Boje engages not just with people but with corporate communication artefacts as sources of organisational storytelling, and has been especially active in looking at corporate stories, particularly in the case of Wal-Mart and the Disney Corporation. This may arouse the interest of public relations scholars, since he treats the products of public relations work to a storytelling analysis. Boje engages with public relations products, for example by outlining the organisational stories that are managed by Disney, including the characterisation of Walt Disney and the founding story of the organisation, in contrast to counter-stories; boardroom wrangles, lawsuits and struggles for leadership (Boje, 2007).
There is also the folksy characterisation of Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart, as presented in the company’s annual reports. Both ‘the Wal-Mart story’ and Walton’s characterisation are developed over the years, but when Walton died his story continued to be re-invented and used in company documents, invoking the spirit of ‘Mr Sam’ to approve or decry various aspects of corporate policy and performance (Boje, 2008).

Entertaining though this is, Boje remains frustratingly distant from the processes and techniques of the storytelling process as it is enacted in mundane working routines. His focus is on the analysis of stories, not on the routines and techniques that accompany their production. As a result, while he is able to extrapolate a story and critique it in relation to the system that produced it, the interpretation relies on Boje’s own analysis of any motivations and conflicts, rather than on a first hand account of how the stories actually came to be the way they are. As a result, this is criticism that generalises practices and people by imposing a strategic intention as part of its post hoc analysis. This rush towards abstraction leaves working worlds and the people within them dangerously under-described. In doing so, it informs us what the writer thinks about public relations, but does not advance our understanding of what public relations is, its techniques and practices, the people who do it, or the diverse intentions and messiness of their working lives (Elmer, 2009).

For example, in Boje’s analysis of the Wal-Mart annual report he adopts an analysis that favours a conspiracy view of motivations and events, so that the annual report represents purposive acts of communication. Such an analysis offers an engaging account of the way the company presents itself through the annual report, but a weak account of intentionality and process. Public relations practitioners involved in the production of annual reports routinely suggest that the process is commonly problematic. The process is often collaborative, but may also be a source of conflict; copy may be changed and re-changed by functional heads, appropriate images may be hard to source. While some annual reports may be entirely well ordered, deliberative and consciously crafted, others may be the result of unwelcome and haphazard compromises, which means that they reflect not so much corporate or even individual will, so much as the art of the possible. Such observations do not render analysis invalid, but they raise problems of author intentionality and may result in accounts that, though acute and informative in themselves, may misrepresent the processes and persons concerned.

These approaches to storytelling analysis are echoed in some public relations scholarship. Mickey’s (2003) analysis of public relations, for example, takes specific public relations techniques, such as persuasive campaigns, news releases, publicity materials, and subjects them to Derridean deconstruction, while Miller has generated much critical mileage from his post hoc analysis of public relations activities in the UK which, like Boje, tends to a more systematic view of causes and effects (Miller & Dinan, 2007). More recently, Pieczka (2007) has subjected practitioner accounts to a narrative analysis, paying particular emphasis both to what is said and to what remains un-voiced. This allows her to expose some of the discomfort surrounding the buyer-practitioner relationship, by exploring the anti-narrative, that which refuses to make
sense, as well as the narrative (Boje, 2001). For researchers searching for a route
towards a critical engagement with public relations outputs such as campaigns,
Pieczka’s route promises much; it is not dependent on primary data, but it uses nar-
rative analysis to shift away from functional accounts and enrich our approach to
public relations case studies, for example. One possible development of this is to draw
attention to the range and inter-dependence of stories that are brought into play.
Such an analysis might engage the notion of polyvocality that is developed within
Bakhtin’s narrative theory; the use of theory that had its origins in literary analysis
would reflect interests that are already beginning to emerge within management
theory and among inter-disciplinary researchers.

Concluding this section, Czarniawska’s (1997) work on narrative approaches to
organisations illustrates how the idea of creating purposive narrative is multilayered
and offers a bridge between the theory of shared understandings, narrative theory and
the distinctiveness of the public relations role. Czarniawska engages three approaches;
anthropological, literary, and the institutional school within sociology. Her method-
ology is broadly constructivist, and contributes the notion that for human action to
be intelligible, it has to be situated in a narrative, an approach that draws on Berger &
Luckman (1966). Her research focus is informed, on the one hand, by the literary
approaches of MacIntyre, Fisher and Polkinghorne and, on the other, by the new
institutionalism of DiMaggio, Meyer and Powell. This combination refers back to the
Chicago School for its foundations, using narrative as the model of the way in which
knowledge is created, and institutionalism to account for the collective nature of
social life. Under this ‘world as text’ analysis, social life and narrative are indivisible
(Barthes, 1977: 79) and human action and texts are viewed as equivalents, that is,
they can be ‘read’ (following Ricoeur, 1981) so emphasis falls on the way that various
narratives (occupational, personal, organisational) compete.

This new-institutional paradigm is coupled to an ethnomethodological approach,
that attempts to understand organisations as an anthropologist may, either as a visitor
or as a native, but with the aim of revealing cultures and meanings (see also L’Etang,
this volume, for a discussion of ethnemethodology in PR, and Hodges for an appli-
cation of the method). This contrasts with the functionalist and more particularly the
systems-based paradigm that has been more or less dominant in public relations since
the mid-1980s. Grunig & Hunt’s (1984) seminal text Managing Public Relations works
entirely within a dominant understanding of both organisational and communicative
realms within systems, with a public relations role that occupies a boundary position
and has a regulatory influence (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, 8–15). Czarniawska’s rejection
of the open systems approach to organisations is based on three main criticisms.
Firstly, that the categorisations it relies upon are increasingly false because organisa-
tions and their environments are not easily distinguishable. Second, that the notion of
adaptation to that environment is misleading; instead she adopts a more construc-
tionist model (Lewontin, 1995) or an enacted model, in which meaning is not a
response to something ‘out there’ but to social relationships and behaviours (Weick,
1979). Third, that mergers, acquisitions, the privatisation of public bodies, the trans-
lation of citizens into consumers, and lack of boundaries between economy, politics,
society and identity (for example, Deuze, 2005; Simmons, 2002; Smart, 2003; Sennett, 2000) mean that many of the categorisations on which systems theory (and therefore much established public relations theory with it) no longer hold (Czarniawska, 1977; see also L’Etang, this volume). Czarniawska’s criticism of systems theory is not unique, but I have covered it here because it traces lines of doubt about systems theory in terms that public relations scholars may recognise and expand upon. It pursues alternatives that are narrative in the way they identify and codify research data, and in the attention given to storytelling practices, so drawing together several strands of narrative enquiry.

In pursuit of an alternative analysis, Czarniawska draws attention to three types of narrative knowledge in organisations. First, there is the collection of narratives from within organisations, in which Gabriel has proved such a leading figure. However, while the trend in the 1980s was for researchers to treat stories as artefacts waiting to be collected by researchers, this has broadened to include a view of storytelling as the never-ending construction of meaning in organisations, and has encompassed, for example, psychoanalytic readings (Gabriel, 1999) and analyses that focus on the emotional value of story at work (Czarniawska 1997: 28; Fineman 1996). Second, there is the narrative interpretation of organisational accounts (treating organisational events as stories, for example in case study treatments or in order to bring insights from narrative fiction to organisational analysis), extending shared meanings by making a connection between the narrative and the logo-scientific method of knowing. A third strand of Czarniawska’s narrative knowledge has more direct application to methodology. In her conception of ‘organising as narration’, she means that the narrative form is the ‘natural’ – that is, unreflective – form of data that is most likely to be gathered in interviews. This tradition of organisation studies is interpretive and generates alternative or competing stories from the field in order to develop a dialogue within practice, or to generate a dialogue between theory and practice.

However, it is not true that we can ‘tell stories as we please, and in doing so shape our lives as we see fit’ (Czarniawska, 1997: 14), which is a standard criticism of constructivism. We are ‘never sole authors of our own narratives’ (ibid.) and in each conversation a positioning takes place in which the position is accepted, challenged or negotiated by participants in the conversation. The positioning is a continuous process, subject to revision. In addition, and in relation to our subsequent discussion of roles, other people or institutions sometimes make narratives for us without our inclusion. Boje even notices how it is possible for artificial intelligence to gather and ‘story’ materials against a wider narrative of, for example, national security, by using voice traces, e-mails, internet visits and credit card data to create stories in which we are the subject (Boje, 2007). Although we co-author our own story it is not always a conversation between equals.

In this way the accounts of storytelling that arise from management scholarship encounter debates about power and negotiated position, and are engaged in the debate between structure and agency. While they do not recoil from such issues, they mark a change in emphasis towards sociological concerns and approaches. If we wish to engage further, we must reflect this in our study of storytelling in public relations.
The concentration on storytelling here arises from close attention to public relations work and workers, which in turn emerges from a consideration of societies, occupations and people.

**Public relations, cultural labour, storytelling**

The management school approaches outlined here offer a range of ways to encounter public relations afresh. However, adopting any one of them does not disturb the hegemony within public relations scholarship that treats tactical practices as marginal to our accounts of public relations work and workers. Both the manager-technician debate and glass ceiling studies have focused on the creation of structural and normative understandings of public relations, at the expense of practices. As we turn to re-encounter storytelling from the perspective of cultural labour, those practices assume a more central position within a socio-cultural analysis. As a result we can acknowledge the important position that tactical activities occupy, but also concentrate more on details that have not been previously regarded with particular interest. For example, a sociological engagement with storytelling might draw attention to the importance of invention and creative response, but also the habituated techniques of personhood that it requires.

Cultural critique of public relations falls within a narrow field of enquiry that deals with the cultural industries (Nixon, 2003; Mort, 1996) and which focuses on a group of occupations that Pierre Bourdieu termed ‘new cultural intermediaries’ (1984: 324). His use of the term has been both celebrated and criticised and it has been extended to occupations including disc jockeys, academics, and youth workers (Nixon, 2002). One, rather broad, definition is that these industries are concerned with ‘amusement, self-affirmation, social display and so on’ (Scott, 1997: 323 cited in Nixon, 2003: 3). However, public relations is included in Bourdieu’s own description of the cultural intermediary as an emerging fraction of the petit bourgeoisie:

> all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services … and in cultural production and organisation.

*(Bourdieu, 1984: 359)*

Exploring public relations as a style of cultural labour problematises it in new ways. It concentrates our attention on the particular conditions of the labour market, its position with the economic and political landscape, and the interpenetrated nature of persons and occupations within a critique of post-industrial labour. By exploring these topics we encounter debates from public relations studies, from the sociology of work and the sociology of the person, in ways that allow storytelling practices to appear as part of an emerging picture of the public relations person.

Positions have been advanced that suggest the increasing commodification of services, people and meanings (Jameson, 1984; Baudrillard, 1983), the emergence of
types of work that rely on information, knowledge and the manipulation of signs as a basis of activity (Scase & Davis, 2000), and the emergence of the commercial cultural industries as a site of simultaneous production and consumption (Lash and Urry, 1994). Within this critical landscape, theories concerning patterns of production and consumption have sometimes been advanced in ways that make a commonsense understanding of work difficult to achieve (Nixon, 2003: 16; Pettinger et al., 2005: 8).

The drive towards critical abstraction contributes little to our explanations of the ways that particular practices and people develop, since attention shifts so quickly to criticism at a structural level. Our understanding of public relations work as a social function may be advanced by such an approach, but if we aim to reach an understanding of public relations workers, we require close attention to their working lives and practices, in ways that focus on individuals and their work (see, for example, both Hodges and Hodges & McGrath, this volume).

This close attention to people and practices engenders an emphasis on the person, not as a psychological entity but as the site of historical and corporeal existence (Rose, 1996: 28; Du Gay, 2007: 42). Becoming a person in context requires a mastery of the self using particular techniques and introduces an interest in the conduct of life and the sociology of persons that, in one broad sweep, takes in the sociology of Weber, Foucault and Bourdieu. Drawing on this tradition contributes a sense of the specific techniques and practices that are developed in order to conduct both our personhood and our occupation. Bourdieu, for example, suggests that our occupations are the site of pitiless competition, in which we attain social positions through political force but also by acquiring what he referred to as capitals, such as knowledge, money, or membership of particular social groups (see Edwards, this volume). We also learn to acquire particular ways of walking, talking, dressing, and eating, and how to understand the rules of the particular game that relate to our work. As a result, even as analysis focuses on the ways that individual social positions are achieved, we are forced to account for the types of power and knowledge that they deploy through the disposition of individuals.

By adopting this approach to public relations work and workers, routines and techniques of practice are re-emphasised in ways that resist their subjugation as technical or tactical. Knowing how to convincingly enact the disposition and techniques required of a public relations practitioner, in a very precise context, is the focus of the analysis. This runs counter to managerialist theories of practice that have enjoyed such a long run within public relations studies (Dozier and Broom, 1995). It suggests instead that a close attention to those techniques is necessary in order to explain the political, economic and cultural position that they occupy. Under this analysis, the things that practitioners do, the technical components of their labour, are freed from the restrictive scripts of normative public relations scholarship. Storytelling is as central to this analysis as writing a news release, if it helps to reveal what it means to have the ‘feel for the game’ that Bourdieu termed ‘le sens pratique’ (Bourdieu, 1997: 85–87). So, for that matter, is knowing what to wear or how to speak. Techniques that go unobserved or are marginalised under a managerialist analysis assume a new centrality, and are called into question as mechanisms that link structural conditioning to social practices and regulation (Lau, 2004: 370).
In summary, while management school approaches contribute a range of analytical tools that can be applied to public relations practice, they do not tackle a major failure of hegemonic public relations theory; it tends to view techniques as marginal. We see this most clearly in formulations that treat tactical work as a poor relation to activities that are defined as strategic, or managerial, or which accrue particular positions in organisations. Close attention to work and workers offers to reinvigorate the discussion of practice and connect it to theory afresh. A storytelling act can be framed, even celebrated, as a form of imaginative invention that is indifferent to extralinguistic reality (Lyotard, 1979/1986: 61; Bruner, 1990: 44). It is also an act that acquires its meaning as an act of profitable sense-making, and in which the specific performance of the practitioner is essential, rather than coincidental.

**Future directions in PR storytelling**

Based on my own observations of practice over a decade, storytelling continues to be an important part of public relations routines. There is ample evidence among practitioners for the spontaneous performance of narratives that are creative, and which involve an emotional performance in the storyteller and an emotional response in the audience, most particularly in face-to-face advocacy, but also in the client relationship. While the approach to analysis derives from Bourdieu, the method of identifying this particular technique draws on the folkloric accounts of storytelling practice that arise in management studies (Gabriel 2000; Boje 2007; Fineman; 2000). There are also examples of dialogic practice, especially in the one-to-one phone calls between media relations practitioners and journalists, within which stories are co-created in light of a range of competing narratives, as work from management and public relations studies suggests (Boje, 2007; Pieczka, 2007). There is evidence, too, for the self-conscious use of story in practice as a way of habituating novice storytellers, teaching them to pattern public relations activities as believable and engaging stories. One London public relations agency uses Disney’s children’s videos as a training aid for practitioners, encouraging them to ‘story’ their public relations campaigns, to identify a hero, develop plot and character surrounding the main protagonists, to propose a dazzling outcome and a dark alternative, a setback overcome, but to retell their stories in the pursuit of promoting microchip manufacture for a client.

Public relations researchers, encountering the field afresh, often find that storytelling exerts an intuitive appeal, but that the various strands of discussion are so interpenetrated that it is a hard task to disentangle them. As a result, the possibilities for using a storytelling method to develop richly descriptive data are immediate, but when it comes to placing that within a secure analytical framework, project proposals falter on a lack of precision about what, exactly, we are dealing with. An approach to an activity? A method of analysis? Storytelling has been applied descriptively to all three. Where, then, does this leave the researcher?

Enthusiasm for storytelling often begins with a superficially simple (and therefore appealing) research proposition: ‘I’ll find some practitioners and get them to tell me their stories’. Researchers are often inspired by the folkloric overtones encountered,
but nervous about engaging with the tightest criteria for spontaneous performances. Analysis also generates its own problems; while earlier articulations of this methodology tended to objectify those under study and treat stories as data that could be ‘discovered’ by the researcher, emphasis has shifted in more recent sociological work to the ‘storied’ way that accounts are generated. This, in turn, emphasises stories as narrative structures that are co-created in response to social or research conditions, raising problems of authorship and authorial voice. The admission of dialogue, then, shifts emphasis away from stories as objects, and towards accounts of practices that are subjected to a ‘storied’ analysis.

Such ‘storied’ critiques of public relations practices remain a minority pursuit. Although it is clear that many talented researchers and faculty members can contribute an inter-disciplinary approach to the analysis of public relations, there seems to be reluctance within public relations faculties to pursue and develop this. It can perhaps be explained by the relative immaturity of the subject, the composition of the faculty, and uncertainty surrounding the legitimacy of particular types of analysis within this environment. Pursuing these approaches in faculties, therefore, involves both students and supervisors in taking risks. There will always be those who feel that risks are undesirable in education, while others believe that intellectual risks are the wellspring of knowledge. A greater variety of analytical approaches would signal that public relations scholarship was reaching a more mature stage.

Finally, there is the opportunity to examine the storytelling role within a sociologically inflected examination of practice that focuses specifically on the techniques, routines, relationships and particular work of public relations practitioners. This is perhaps the most plausible route for researchers who have developed within a social science paradigm, although the short timescales available for many public relations research projects present problems at the operational level, both in the time available for fieldwork and in allowing researchers time to develop the reflexivity needed to conduct analysis. However, while social science methodologies are routine in most public relations research environments, the sociological and cultural engagements with the subject are still relatively recent, even if, as this volume suggests, they are growing.

Notes

1 The point is not a new one, and has faint echoes of Aristotle’s defence of poetry’s superiority to history as a way of educating young men about warfare, since it was the poet who could convey most clearly what it felt like to be in battle (Aristotle, 1996).
2 As found in Aristotle’s definition of pathos, or intimate knowledge of the disposition of the audience, in order to effect a persuasive speech.

References and further reading


This chapter explores the interaction between society and public relations using the framework of fields, capital and habitus proposed by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1930–2002) was a French sociologist who focused on the social mechanisms through which individuals and groups were positioned in society. His seminal work, *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984) provides an account of how taste, operationalised in the context of a specific set of norms, values and attitudes, which he called habitus, and demonstrated through the possession of various assets (social capital, cultural capital, economic capital), serves to distinguish between groups in French society and generates a hierarchy of social positions. His work has been applied to a range of other cultural contexts, and while the forms of capital change depending on the specific context being addressed, the longevity of his ideas has demonstrated their quality and applicability beyond France (see, e.g., Gayo-Cal et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 1999; Aldridge, 1998; Crossley, 2002; and Everett, 2002).

This book illustrates how the effects of public relations work are felt deep within the fabric of society and affect our habitus: the beliefs, values and attitudes that we hold about our roles as consumers, voters, citizens, students, academics, and a host of other identities. The starting point for this argument is that public relations is not a free-floating, neutral occupation, isolated from its social context. On the contrary, it is loaded with value judgements: PR itself is a ‘culture’ with its own mores, standards and value judgements of what is and is not good ‘PR’ (Pieczka, 2002; see also L’Etang, this volume). These are reflected in the value placed on different types of communication by the profession, and in the messages that practitioners develop, which ultimately shape our perceptions of the world.

At the same time, research on public relations practice in different countries and cultures (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009; see also Hodges, this volume) demonstrates that the socio-cultural environment in which public relations is enacted also affects the way the profession evolves. This effect is exercised through the individuals that join
the occupation, the organisations for whom PR work is done, and through PR’s status in relation to other occupations in the broader economic field.

This chapter reflects more deeply on these dynamics, using Bourdieu’s framework of fields, capital and habitus as the theoretical lens to examine the mechanisms through which this mutual influence takes place. The theoretical arguments are illustrated using research findings from two studies of PR in the UK. The first was a case study of PR activity in a large commercial transport operator, Roule, based in the north of England. As a participant-observer, I spent three months with the Corporate Affairs team in 2007, interviewing them and their colleagues, observing their interaction with other areas of the company, and noting the processes through which their work was executed (Edwards, 2009, 2008). The second study was a year-long investigation of the professional experiences of Black and other minority ethnic PR practitioners in the UK industry, carried out in 2009 (the Diversity study). Data sources comprised 34 interviews and seven group interviews with BME practitioners, eight practitioner diaries and a variety of documentation from the top 10 UK consultancies and the two national industry bodies, the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and the Public Relations Consultants Association.

**Bourdieu’s understanding of society**

Bourdieu argued that the social world is structured in terms of fields. There is an overarching field of power that encompasses all other fields and where broad social hierarchies are set out. Generally, people from more privileged backgrounds – for example, with higher levels of income, education, and broader cultural and social knowledge – dominate the field of power (Bourdieu, 1992, 1984).

Fields are homologous; in other words, the structure of smaller fields such as public relations reflects the structures of the field of power. Therefore, individuals who are more privileged in the wider social context tend to dominate not only in the field of power, but also in smaller fields (Bourdieu, 1999). Conversely, people who do not enjoy such privileges tend to be found lower down the social hierarchy, and lower in the hierarchies of smaller fields.

Bourdieu (1992) conceptualises fields as systems of competitive relations between different agents in a particular sphere of activity. Each field is defined by a particular type of practice: occupations like public relations can be defined as fields, but so too can different sports, different occupations, and even different organisations (Bourdieu, 1992; Everett, 2002). Fields are distinctive in that they have a particular doxa: a set of implicit beliefs that shape practice within the field (Bourdieu, 1990). To belong to the field is to adopt the doxa. In public relations, the doxa relates to the role of the profession in society, the techniques that are used to realise that role and the rationale given to clients and others to justify public relations’ importance in light of the current economic, social and cultural context (Pieczka, 2006, 2002).

Fields are bounded; they have a limited amount of space. Each agent occupies a different position within their particular field and competes for power and status with
other agents in that field (Bourdieu, 1984). Because fields are bounded, if one agent succeeds in acquiring more status and power for themselves, then another must lose out. In the case of PR, the agents in the field are the different practitioners who compete for jobs, promotion opportunities, or awards, and also the different consultancies that vie for prestigious accounts and try to demonstrate their unique superiority, in order to boost revenue and reputation.

Status in a field is achieved by accumulating particular types of assets, called capital. There are three main types: economic capital (primarily financial assets); social capital (the resources that one can claim from one’s personal networks); and cultural capital (understandings of cultural and social norms and access to forms of cultural and social activity, developed through one’s family upbringing, education and, to a lesser extent, processes of education later in life such as occupational training) (Bourdieu, 1997). While the forms of capital can incorporate a wide range of different assets, the doxa of a particular field defines which ones will be relevant in that context and, of these, which will attract symbolic value. This symbolic value is defined in terms determined by the field’s elite and means that the capital attracts more meaning, and more value, than its material attributes suggest (Bourdieu, 1997, 1984). Bourdieu calls this symbolic capital.

Agents that own symbolic capital can lay claim to symbolic power, the power to define reality in terms that support their own position. Positioned at the top of a field’s hierarchy, they disseminate a view of reality that supports their own superior status. Moreover, because they disguise their personal interests in this ‘reality’, it becomes normalised, so that those lower down the hierarchy, whom it may well disadvantage, simply accept it as common sense (Bourdieu, 1991). This normalisation process is one of the reasons why those who enjoy symbolic power are extremely hard to displace: to challenge them often means challenging a whole system of beliefs that underpin the way a particular field operates, but that are invisible to those who ultimately promote them. The following quote from one of the participants in the Diversity study illustrates the practical consequences of this. She had taken up the post of harassment advisor in her workplace, and found that her efforts to explain the reality of harassment in the organisation were neither welcomed nor well understood, because, as part of the privileged group of white men, none of the managers had been the focus of harassment themselves.

I became a harassment advisor, we had a black minority group that went to talk to management on various issues about what was going around, very hard, the organisation found it very hard to deal with it. Again, you’re talking to white males, saying that this is an issue. They didn’t see it because they were all right, Jack, thank you very much.

(Interview 15, Diversity study)

Because fields are defined by their own doxa, some symbolic capital is always field-specific: in PR, it may be an award from an industry body; a particularly prestigious or valuable client; membership of a private club; or a social network that includes
high profile people from a particular industry (celebrities, government ministers, or successful businessmen, for example). This kind of symbolic capital can help PR practitioners shore up their authority with internal or external clients, as Roule’s media relations manager clearly recognised.

[Awards] help with the internal PR with the rest of the business because they can see an award-winning PR team, must be doing something right, if we are winning the gold PR award, the gold R there from PR week, which is the pinnacle of the PR industry.

(Media Relations Manager, Roule)

Similarly, client lists and client campaigns are used by PR consultancies to market their credentials. As well as a generic discourse about the quality of the retained clients, consultancy web sites frequently have a link to endorsements and case study details. Consultancy directors are promoted as experts and highly skilled in specific areas, based on their past experience with high-profile clients and campaigns (see, for example, www.finsbury.com; http://www.fishburn-hedges.com/aboutus/people/; http://www.hillandknowlton.co.uk/why/the-agency-behind-the-work; http://www.edelman.co.uk/what-we-do/consumer; www.brunswickgroup.com; http://www.citigatedewerogerson.com/launching_products_and_services.html).

Other forms of symbolic capital can be ‘imported’ from the wider social environment because of the homology of fields. Things that carry symbolic value in wider society and lend their owners power and influence (e.g. a degree from a high status university; designer suits; being male rather than female; having a social network with connections to the political elite), tend to do the same in smaller, more specific fields like PR. Because such things are not necessarily merit-based, they affect the occupational field informally rather than formally, as one practitioner explained when commenting on the ‘old boys’ network’ that seemed to operate in UK public relations industry.

I suppose that’s what I’m alluding to really. I think it is [an old boys’ network], definitely. It’s kind of like universities, which universities you’ve been to and maybe who your kind of parents know, etcetera. I still think that’s around in PR.

(Interview 19, Diversity study)

Often, this is more obvious to people outside the field than inside it, because inside the field such assets do not seem to represent privilege, but are instead taken for granted as an objective standard.

I think that’s probably going to be a big barrier for, for somebody coming to industry is that kind of what people see as being accept … it’s not exactly what’s expected … um, yeah, they just wouldn’t take on a kid, you know, who has … from Birmingham who says ‘Innit’ every other word.

(Interview 3, Diversity study)
Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of fields, capital and symbolic power, helps us understand why the structure of public relations as a professional field reflects the structure of the society in which it is embedded. Its professionals are largely white, middle-class, and the profession is heavily gendered, in that men are over-represented at senior levels (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009; PRWeek, 2009). What counts as symbolic capital in the wider social context also counts in PR. Entering the profession with this kind of capital makes it easier to access field-specific capital, since practitioners will start their career further up the PR hierarchy and consequently have access to more opportunities, more quickly. The following extract from the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) Frontline Guide to a Career in PR (Public Relations Consultants Association, 2009) for young graduates considering PR as a career illustrates the way in which explicit and implicit criteria for entry work together to specify and reward a particular type of person with a particular set of symbolic capital.

The PR personality

Consultancies are usually jam-packed with a diverse range of people who all bring different skills to the table whether it is their creative thinking, media contacts or client servicing skills. However, if you are someone who likes routine and wants to be out of the office on time every day without fail, PR may not be the right job for you.

A successful PR consultant is prepared to take risks and is constantly searching for new innovative and creative ways to give their clients access to the media. Ultimately if you are passionate about your clients and the campaigns you are working on, these campaigns will become the success stories that are revered and remembered by the rest of the industry.

PR Skills

To succeed in PR you need to have a number of skills in very different areas:

- **Communications:** Your communications skills, both written and verbal, must be exemplary. You will be writing a variety of communications materials, such as press releases, reports and features. You will also need to pitch your ideas to busy journalists over the phone or to your clients in a presentation.

- **Organised:** PR consultants often have a number of clients in their portfolio. You must be able to manage your time well and multi-task in order to keep several accounts and projects running well at all times.

- **Flexible:** Your clients may work across many different sectors, and you will need to keep switching your focus between them throughout the day. You will also need to be adaptable with regards to working hours; if it makes more sense to meet a journalist in the evening, then that’s when you’ll need to go! PR is rarely a 9-to-5 job.

- **Creative:** Finding the right hook to get your client into their target media can be tricky. You will need to be able to think creatively and come up with ideas that inspire your team, your clients and of course, the media.
A cool head: PR is unpredictable and situations can develop suddenly that require immediate action. You need to be someone who responds well to tight deadlines and can keep a cool head when the pressure hits.

Hard-working: Hours can be long and clients can be demanding; you need to be someone who can really get their head down and focus.

Sociable: But it’s not all work and no play. The best way to build relationships with clients and journalists is often out of the office, in a social setting. You need to be someone who finds it easy to get along with people you don’t know and make conversation. Building up a network of contacts is vital if you want to excel in this profession.

(The Frontline Guide to a Career in PR: 5)

While these skills specify a particular type of person, they can only be fulfilled under particular social circumstances. For example, being able to work long hours and socialise after work requires freedom from family constraints as well as the financial wherewithal to fund socialising and perhaps a taxi home. Being able to mix with all types of people requires experience of a wide range of cultural capital — something that is more strongly associated with privileged groups than others (Gayo-Cal et al., 2006; Erickson, 1996). Exemplary communications skills may sound straightforward, but these are evidenced more easily by those who have a degree from a prestigious university. It is these subtle but pertinent criteria, among other things, that generate the ‘typical’ PR practitioner identity. The following description of a ‘typical PR person’ from one of the focus group participants illustrates the point and shows how the tactical stereotype of public relations is intimately linked with a generic and embodied practitioner identity:

She’s on her BlackBerry talking a lot, um, there’s a lot of … there’s a lot of hot air, very little substance. Nice handbag, the nice shoes, the credit cards are maxed out, because people in PR are not paid very much money, but you’ve got to have the look. You’ve gotta have the look. So it’s all about taking your clients out for … and hoping they don’t really know their wine, because that way you can buy the cheapest bottle of Chardonnay going and they don’t know about it, you know, […] they have to entertain like they work in finance and banking, but they don’t have the same kind of bucks to back it up, unless you work in entertainment PR, and even then a lot of that’s grace and favour. And so again to complete the look, um, there’s like a veneer of confidence, bravado, darling, darling, you would not believe the people I know, a lot of networking, a lot of ‘who do you know’.

(Focus group 5, Diversity study)

Of course, practitioners differ from this norm and the requisite professional image may vary by sector as well. But the fact remains that the profession itself, in its descriptions of PR attributes, helps to perpetuate this stereotype.
The importance of habitus

The concept of fields outlined above reflects the dynamic through which social structures are reflected in public relations. However, equally important is the manner in which we ourselves take assumptions, values and beliefs with us into our chosen professions, a process which also results in a professional culture that values some perspectives of the world above others. Bourdieu argues that this process is enacted through habitus.

Habitus is the set of durable dispositions developed and inculcated over time, through family and education, that determine the way we comprehend our social environment and our role within it (Bourdieu, 1984). It is manifest in our values, beliefs and attitudes, evident in the language we use and embodied in our behaviours, often unconsciously (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus is also the mechanism through which we acquire specific types of (social and cultural) capital that position us in the overarching field of power. For example, a child attending a private, fee-paying school, tends to have access to elite social networks and elite forms of cultural knowledge. They also absorb the values and attitudes that define such networks and forms of knowledge as superior to other kinds – those that a student attending a state-run school might acquire, for example. This gives them the ability to mix comfortably with other elite individuals, who have the same types of capital and understandings of the world. Because of the homology of fields, this process enables these individuals to acquire potential symbolic capital from a young age, regardless of the occupation they decide to enter (Bourdieu, 1984). This is particularly useful for PR practitioners, who have to interact with a wide range of people, some of whom are very senior, in the course of their work.

Generally, the greater the symbolic value associated with aspects of our habitus, the higher our status. Thus, practitioners profiled in PRWeek’s regular column featuring leading practitioners, invariably had cultural and social connections that were specifically mentioned and generated additional status for them:

Allan remains close to his former Downing Street colleagues, many of whom are now in the cabinet. In particular, work and pensions secretary James Purnell was best man at his wedding and remains his closest friend.

Many senior journalists also know him well. The Sun’s George Pascoe-Watson, a regular golfing chum, says: ‘He used to firefight in Downing Street and knows the players – he totally understands the system’.

(‘Leaving Blair Behind’, PRWeek, 15 May 2009: 16)

A similar dynamic is often associated with attending university and pursuing ‘pure’, rather than applied degrees.

I’ve got a degree in politics erm, an MA in politics from Glasgow University, […] I mean, when you go and see people about Roule, they want to know about what’s happening with Roule. Erm, but yes, it does, erm, it does
help to have a wider understanding of what’s happening politically and economically.

(External Affairs Manager, Roule)

Bourdieu argues that habitus and social structures are inseparable: our habitus emerges in the context of the overarching social hierarchy that determines our place in the world. At the same time, it validates those structures by normalising their existence in our understanding of the world (Bourdieu, 1999). Because habitus is absorbed so early in life, and so unquestioningly, Bourdieu suggests that we unwittingly perpetuate social structures simply by following these normalised understandings of the world (Bourdieu, 1984; Swartz, 1997). In other words, because we do not challenge the way society is structured, and because we follow what we have learnt to be appropriate behaviour, beliefs, values and attitudes for ‘people like us’, we maintain rather than challenge existing social divisions. In turn, habitus is shaped and perpetuated by the structures of the environment in which that practice takes place: ‘habitus [is] structured, and doubly informed, by the structure of the space and the structures of the schemes of perception that apply to it’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 183).

Because our habitus is always with us, it shapes the way we practise in any particular field. For example, in PR, it shapes practitioners’ understanding of the role of PR in the world (the field’s doxa) and what it is to be a responsible practitioner, as well as what kinds of attributes are necessary to be a ‘PR professional’. The elite nature of PR’s occupational identity is revealed in the following quote from the Director General and Managing Director of the PRCA:

There has never been a better time to work in public relations. Ours is a vibrant, growing profession, rewarding hard work and encouraging ambition. Each and every piece of independent research shows that our industry has grown enormously in the past, and is set for even greater things in the future.

The reason why PR is a growing and popular expertise is simple – decision-makers increasingly recognise that it is absolutely central to their organisation’s future. Put simply, organisations that take care of their PR prosper; those that ignore it falter.

That growing recognition explains why so many PR professionals provide counsel at the very highest level; whether to businesses, charities or governments. Why they are well-paid and well-respected. And what is true of PR in general is doubly so for consultancies. Our members represent the intellectual powerhouse of the profession. They create an exceptional number of the creative ideas that drive PR. And that means they seek out the clear thinkers; the innovative; and the bold.

(Public Relations Consultants Association, 2009: 3)

Habitus is slow to change because its very nature reaffirms the correctness of our own views; consequently, we are motivated to seek out others who would see the world the same way. In other words, when searching for friends, or deciding on an
occupation, we seek evidence that the habitus we are going to engage with is compatible with our own. PR students might be attracted to the profession, for example, because it seems to employ people they identify with and who like doing the same things that they do. Similarly, when we are deciding whether to welcome someone into a group, such as an occupation, we consider their ‘fit’ with us based on indicators such as accent, dress, educational background, cultural likes and dislikes – all forms of capital that we assess on the basis of the values inherent in our habitus. Consequently, like tends to attract like.

Fields, including occupations like PR, are strengthened by the fact that their members possess a similar habitus that connects them in social space. ‘[N]ot all social groupings are equally probable, and this social artefact which is a social group has all the more chance of existing and durably subsisting if the assembled agents who construct it are already close to each other in social space’ (Bourdieu, 1998: 33).

In occupational fields, this is illustrated by the implicit and explicit entry and progression criteria defined by employers and professional bodies that reflect not just notions of merit, but also of ‘fit’ (e.g. Sommerlad, 2008, 2009). In public relations, for example, merit-based criteria for entry might be a degree and a certain amount of work experience. However, criteria relating to ‘fit’ might not be so explicit, relating to accent, personal background, ethnicity or the university at which one did the degree, rather than the degree itself.

I found that there are lots of different reasons why different people couldn’t be hired by certain firms and it started with education. Two firms I worked for, it was outside of their comfort zone to hire people who either didn’t go to Oxford or Cambridge or didn’t go to, at least to have gone to a recognisable public school or to Sandhurst.

(Focus group 6, Diversity study)

The thing is as a minority you’ve got two layers of challenges; first I’m black. You don’t have a lot of black people in PR, right? One. Then secondly I’m African, with an African accent, with my substantial part of my career life coming from Africa and Africa is not seen as a very advanced market in PR. So the client … the agency would be reluctant to put me in front of a client and say, ‘This guy is going to be in charge of your account’ because the client might feel, ‘Okay well you’re not resourcing my account with the right people’. I understood that, but it was a setback for me because if you are not in account management, you don’t get to really understand what’s going on in the market and I think that’s a challenge, any other PR practitioner that is of a minority group and coming here to practise, that’s one of the things they’ll face because, for instance, in every agency I’ve worked in I’ve been the only black person. Then the only black African. The only African. So I’m just like a single person standing there, it’s not a very good experience, but I’ve managed to scale through.

(Interview 26, Diversity study)
Inevitably, both types of criteria mean that PR attracts and draws on people from a particular level in the social hierarchy to populate itself. Wealthier sections of society are better represented at university, have the flexibility and financial means to undertake unpaid work experience and also have money to invest in smart clothes or take elocution lessons, if required. People who don’t have some or all of these assets can feel like ‘outsiders’ and find it difficult to join the occupation, or progress in it.

**Social privilege and PR practice**

Often, PR’s influence on society is conceptualised in terms of the messages that it produces that persuade us to buy this, support that, or believe the other. However, this level of analysis focuses on specific instances of influence and fails to recognise the systemic nature of the mutual effects of PR and society. In contrast, understanding PR through a Bourdieuvian lens allows us to understand its role as part of the social systems that shape our lives.

If practitioners come from very diverse backgrounds, the range of habitus that they bring to the profession should reflect different understandings of the world. However, as we have seen both habitus and the homology of fields generate a tendency for public relations to recruit a particular type of person with a particular type of background. In the UK, for example, 96% of practitioners define themselves as white, 75% have a university degree, and 97% are able-bodied (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009). These statistics alone indicate that the occupational body is privileged compared to the general population: 12.9% of the working age population belong to a non-white ethnic group, a figure which increases to 31.5% in London, where the bulk of the PR industry is based (Office for National Statistics, 2009a); 4.8% have a disability (Office for National Statistics, 2009b) and 23% have an undergraduate degree or other higher education qualification (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009).

As I have already argued, the field of PR will favour the values, attitudes and symbolic capital that characterise people from this narrow band of elite individuals. An exploratory survey of UK PR practitioners’ cultural capital confirmed that the patterns of cultural taste, knowledge and activity were consistent with those observed among dominant social groups from higher classes (Edwards, 2008). Moreover, these groups have a greater stake in the existing economic and political status quo, from which they benefit. Neo-liberal maxims such as consumer choice, the supremacy of the market and individualism, which define the wider economic and political field, are less likely to be questioned, even if public relations’ role is perceived as the ‘ethical conscience’ of its client organisations.

If the field of PR attracts people from a similar type of habitus, drawn from a similar position in the social hierarchy, with a similar view of the world, then this will be reflected in PR practice, because habitus shapes practice. In concrete terms, this means that the lens through which practitioners see the world and understand their role within it has a concrete effect on how they work. It can be seen in the type of clients that consultants value most highly, the messages practitioners produce and
disseminate, and the allocation of symbolic value to different types of capital, which determines progression through the occupational hierarchy. In this sense, PR practitioners exercise ‘symbolic violence’ – perpetuating the dominance of an elite group of individuals over less powerful groups in society through their discursive work (Swartz, 1997).

What about clients?

Practitioners reading this chapter might object to the approach, because I argue that professional identity is derived from their own actions and privilege. They might argue that, despite the drive to attain professional status, public relations is an occupation that is defined by the needs of its clients, with objectives and principles that are determined by, rather than independent of, clients. For example, PR cannot be separated from the overarching, neo-liberal economic field, characterised by a focus on profit and the primacy of individual choice, among other things. Indeed, this, along with democracy, is often implied as a pre-condition for high quality PR (Moloney, 2004; Grunig et al., 2002). Following the homology of fields, the structure of the PR field will reflect these wider political and economic norms.

While a comprehensive survey of the industry has yet to be done, some data is available that gives us an indication of the truth of this in the UK. The biggest users of public relations services are in the public (government) and commercial (corporate) sectors. In the UK, 49% of practitioners work in these two sectors, with an additional 27% working in consultancies, where corporate and government clients dominate. Only 10% of practitioners work in the third sector (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009). Commercial and government organisations benefit from the neo-liberal status quo in the form of revenue and electoral success and their communications are unlikely to challenge the assumptions underpinning existing systems. Indeed, PR practitioners who do their job well will enhance their target audiences’ consumption and participation as neo-liberal consumers and citizens, rather than proposing new ways of seeing the world.

This dynamic can be seen in the audiences that PR prioritises and the status accorded to different practice specialisms (financial PR versus third sector, for example). Any brief review of consultancy websites reveals an emphasis on commercial and government PR, including financial PR, consumer or product-oriented PR, business to business communications, public affairs and lobbying, public sector PR, digital PR or new media, health and medical communications, branding, utilities, and so on (see, for example, http://www.hillandknowlton.co.uk/node/4; http://www.edelman.co.uk/what-we-do; http://www.ketchum.com/expertise; and others). Third sector work or ‘diversity communications’ are rarely specified as specialist areas of practice, an indication of the relatively low symbolic value attached to these areas.

PR practitioners’ self-interest also comes into play here: both consultants and in-house practitioners are engaged in a struggle for symbolic power, not only in the occupation itself, but also within their client organisations. In a consultancy, the client’s wishes determine the communications activities that are delivered. In-house,
practitioners are employed to communicate messages that support the organisation’s interests. In the process of achieving these outcomes, PR practitioners also aim to accumulate capital that can give them a degree of symbolic power within the organisation and secure their position. This could manifest itself in the form of publicising their successes internally, ensuring the quality of their internal presentations is high or protecting their ‘turf’ from encroachment by marketing or HR departments. The Director of Corporate Affairs at Roule summarised the approach taken by his team:

[I]t’s actually continuing to demonstrate yourself and finding those other sort of peaks to, to get internal cut-through if you like, so people actually think oh … yeah, so now, because of that event or that milestone I’ve now got a better understanding of how the PR team add value to the business.

(Director of Corporate Affairs, Roule)

In this context, practitioners focus their attention on the senior management, CEO and directors of organisations, who control the allocation of budgets and resources to the communications function. It is most likely, then, that in-house practitioners shape their work both to meet these people’s approval, and to protect their position at the top of the organisation. After all, a CEO is unlikely to sign off a press release on company performance that plays down his or her importance. Roule’s external affairs manager illustrates the point well when discussing the most important relationships in Roule for the Corporate Affairs team:

Yeah, well, directors. Executive directors are the most important, starting with Oliver [the CEO]. Because really, my view is that this department, Corporate Affairs, if you were redesigning Roule on a bit of paper, I would have Corporate Affairs as an office of the Chief Executive, reporting to him, or the Chief Operating Officer, not the Sales and Marketing Director. I can understand why it’s done like that but I don’t think that reflects our erm, relationship or the work that we do.

(External Affairs Manager, Roule)

Consequently, PR materials inevitably position senior management, their visions and values as both unquestionable and immutable, simultaneously reinforcing the ‘rightness’ of the organisation. The media relations manager at Roule, who was a former journalist, illustrated how these underlying interests affected his day-to-day practice.

My gut reaction is informed by ten years on the other side of that fence and knowing that they need audio, to make a radio station to go round statements are no good they need someone to actually go on the radio, and therefore my initial reaction would be yeah, go and do an interview, erm, what’s changed is that I’ve learnt that my priorities here aren’t about what they want, my priorities here are about what Roule wants and where Roule is going.

(Media Relations Manager, Roule)
In this way, then, the structural characteristics of the occupation, and the lack of independence from clients, produces PR practice that is more likely to perpetuate existing social structures and norms than challenge them. Of course, PR is practised in the not-for-profit and NGO sectors, too, and sometimes by very large organisations in these areas. However, the relative influence of these sectors is small compared to government and commercial clients, and these ‘alternative’ voices must compete for a share of voice in a context where commercial and government interests are the primary definers of the media agenda. Their impact is therefore limited.

**Conclusion**

A Bourdieuvian analysis of PR allows scholars to explore a range of questions that can inform a radical socio-cultural view of PR, providing one way of understanding the processes through which society and public relations interact and co-produce each other. These effects are exerted on multiple levels: through individuals and their personal habitus, through practice in and with organisations, and cumulatively, across the occupational field in its social context.

By looking for evidence of habitus and capital in a particular context, scholars adopting this approach are able to reveal how what is valued by the PR field and its practitioners affects what is done in PR. The discourses that public relations practitioners produce and the priorities that shape their practice are coloured by a particular view of the world, defined by their occupational and personal habitus and the social structures in which those habitus emerge. At the same time, these assumptions, reproduced in the communications delivered by practitioners, are absorbed by target audiences as legitimate lenses through which to view society. While the potential for public relations to be a force for change certainly exists, PR practitioners in marginal sectors must compete with dominant organisations for a discursive space in which to challenge mainstream assumptions about the world we live in. Equally, practitioners in commercial and government organisations who wish to generate change must cultivate a level of reflexivity that allows them to recognise and address the assumptions they incorporate in their day-to-day work.

**Note**

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**References and further reading**


I don’t think that diversity’s really taken that seriously. And I think that’s because an awful lot of agencies are so commercially driven. Until there is money in diversity, there’s no incentive to change. As long as they’re getting the work and clients are coming to them and they’re getting results, as far as they’re concerned that’s pretty much it, it’s the bottom line.

(Kyla, focus group participant)

The way that diversity is understood and experienced in PR is important because, as argued in the previous chapters, PR produces discourses that help constitute and sustain the relative positions of different groups in society as well as within the profession itself. How practitioners understand the value of different groups to society and to their clients will be reflected in the importance they attach to them in their work, producing hierarchical structures that characterise the profession and reflect wider social norms (Bourdieu, 1991; Jaeger, 2001). In both contexts, the lower a group is in the hierarchy, the more difficult it is for them to make their voices heard. In the context of a socio-cultural approach to PR, then, understanding diversity is crucial.

The issue of diversity in public relations is a stage on which the struggles between functional and socio-cultural understandings of practice and theory are played out. The way in which the profession ‘manages diversity’ clashes both discursively and materially with the lived experiences of PR professionals from backgrounds that are in some way different from the professional norm. While the functional view of diversity presents an idealised version of the benefits it can offer to the profession, the lived experience reveals the messiness of life as the ‘other’ practitioner, constantly negotiated in terms of the parameters set by professional elites.

This chapter explores these dynamics, drawing on post-colonial and critical race theory (CRT), to give voice to those who are otherwise silenced in mainstream
discourse. In accordance with post-colonial theory, I use the term ‘other’ and ‘othering’ to describe individuals and groups who are made to feel different in some way from the social, professional and Western-oriented norm that characterises public relations (Said, 1995; Byerly, 2007).

This chapter focuses on ethnicity, rather than ‘race’. While both terms are potentially problematic and risk reifying categorisations that are socially constructed, they are useful in their representational and material effects (Maynard, 1995). ‘Race’ tends to be used to create boundaries for a particular group with reference to biological characteristics, while ethnicity incorporates a wider range of assumptions of ‘difference’ in culture, language, embodiment, economic and social capital (Anthias, 1990, 2001). In the context of this discussion, it is assumptions about ethnicity (which includes ‘race’) that emerge as the most important factor in the analysis. Consequently, I use the term ethnicity in this chapter, except where referring to others’ work.

I begin by outlining the range of discourses about diversity in PR scholarship. I then reflect on these in the context of practice by exploring concepts of diversity in professional texts and contrasting these with narratives from ‘other’ PR professionals in the UK, taken from a recent study of their experiences. I conclude by considering the patterns that are revealed through the comparative analysis, and their implications for research and practice.

Diversity in PR scholarship

The normative view of diversity in PR scholarship can be divided into two main discussions: first, calls to improve diversity in the profession given that practitioners are addressing increasingly diverse audiences (Grunig et al., 2001); and second, calls for greater incorporation of diversity in scholarly work, based on increasing audience fragmentation and the global nature of the profession (Banks, 2000). These discussions rely on the assumption that practitioner diversity is ‘useful’; it allows organisations to engage better with their increasingly varied external audiences. Liberal use is made of statistics predicting the increased size of non-white groups relative to dominant white majorities (Banks, 2000), their spending power and, consequently, their increasing importance to organisations as a source of lucrative markets, of voters, of donors or of obedient citizens. Organisations that communicate well with these groups will benefit from their custom.

The ‘Excellence’ paradigm in PR research, for example, draws on Karl Weick’s (1979) notion of requisite variety to call for diversity within the profession (Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al., 2001). Requisite variety calls for ‘at least as much diversity inside the organisation as outside it’ (Grunig et al., 2001: 135); the assumption is that diverse public relations departments will build more effective external relationships for organisations, because their communication will be perceived to be more credible when stakeholders can relate in some way to the sender (Perloff, 1993). Moreover, while ‘matching’ PR professionals with the characteristics of their audiences may not be required, an ability to understand the world in which those audiences live is necessary
if communication is to be effective (Banks, 2000; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Holtzhausen, 2002; Sriramesh et al., 1999; Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2005). More generally, as populations become more diverse, organisations and professions that do not welcome culturally diverse employees will have an increasingly limited pool of talent from which to draw (Hon & Brunner, 2000; Noon & Ogbonna, 2001).

While these arguments seem to make intuitive sense, closer examination of them reveals a number of flaws. First, taking requisite variety to its logical conclusion leads to a dead end: it is impossible to have practitioners that perfectly match, or have experience of, the whole range of different groups that comprise an organisation’s audiences (Sha & Ford, 2007; Sha, 1993, cited in Grunig et al., 2001: 138). Second, the argument’s persuasive power rests on the validity of the business case, often termed ‘managing diversity’ (Cornelius et al., 2001). No work has been carried out to demonstrate the bottom line effects of diversity in PR, which leaves the argument open to question in this particular context. More widely, despite the somewhat simplistic claims of policy and third sector organisations (Race for Opportunity, 2005), the link between a culturally diverse staff and business performance is not straightforward. It is mediated by the context of the organisation and management approaches to diversity and, like any resource, has to be managed to deliver results (Richard, 2000). Moreover, there are costs to culturally diverse individuals and communities in living up to the claims made in the business case about what they can achieve, that are rarely accounted for (Fairfax, 2005).

From a theoretical perspective, the policy principle of ‘managing diversity’ is itself fundamentally flawed (Noon, 2007; Munshi, 2005). First, managing diversity initiatives are often rationalised on the basis of individual rather than group differences. This ‘diminishes the significance of ethnic identity by trivializing it and overlooking the negative impact of some social group characteristics (such as ethnicity) on employment’ (Noon, 2007: 774). Second, and correspondingly, managing diversity tends to ignore or devalue moral arguments for diversity, except as an incidental side effect of business benefits (Kaler, 2001). This, combined with the fact that ‘managing’ diversity by definition turns diversity into a tactical tool for managers to use, means that diversity is stripped of its social and cultural context and instead becomes narrowly understood as a source of competitive advantage, embedded in a Western-centric frame of reference (Noon, 2007; Munshi, 2005).

The business case assumes that rational businesses are driven by competition and therefore will take advantage of the opportunities that managing diversity offers. Despite this, such initiatives frequently fail to improve levels of diversity in organisations and are often seen as a ‘tick box’ exercise, without any organisational commitment underpinning them (Creegan et al., 2003; Richards, 2001). Noon (2007) explains this in terms of the day-to-day priorities of organisations and managers, including the focus on short-term gains and minimising costs. Other sources of competitive advantage may trump longer-term and more complex diversity initiatives. Given that such initiatives are stripped of any social and moral rationale, this leaves managers with no alternative to the business imperative to justify their implementation.
The other mainstream argument for diversity revolves around the need to expand theoretical understandings of PR practice in order to accommodate non-Western environments (see, for example, Hodges and McGrath, this volume). This recognises that Western models of PR are insufficient and sometimes inappropriate for communicating in an increasingly global organisational environment. International PR work appeals to audiences that might be very different from the country of origin and needs to be sensitive to these differences, in order to avoid alienating those stakeholders (Sriramesh et al., 1999; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2007; Sriramesh & Duhe, 2009). Fundamentally, then, the drive to globalise PR theory is driven by the familiar business case: more appropriate practice will lead to an improved bottom line.

This perspective has produced descriptions of PR practice in different countries, described with reference to the cultural context (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009; Van Ruler & Verčič, 2004; Holtzhausen et al., 2003). More recently, there have been efforts to theorise dimensions of international PR for practitioners to use (Sriramesh & Duhe, 2009). However, many of these descriptions compare non-Western enactments of public relations with the existing structures of Western public relations scholarship such as manager/technician roles and symmetrical communication, without acknowledging the cultural specificity of these ideas (Banks, 2000; Grunig et al., 2001). Consequently, even as the authors challenge the hegemony of these structures, they reinforce their normativity and sustain their dominance, preventing any genuine transformation of the body of PR knowledge. As post-colonial scholars argue, the centrality of Western-style management values simply reinforces the hegemony of divisive US/Western commercial, cultural and communication norms (McKie & Munshi, 2007; Munshi & Kurian, 2005, Munshi & McKie, 2001).

Critiques of normative views of diversity in PR have produced some markedly different theoretical directions. Post-colonial scholar Debashish Munshi (2005), argues that diversity in PR should incorporate the views and lives of the other on their own terms, rather than in terms of Western commerce, and the value of this approach is illustrated well by the work of Hodges, and Hodges & McGrath in this volume. Munshi justifies his view with a consideration of the ethical and social role that practitioners enact through their work and its global and local consequences: the effects of PR work on audiences near and far need to be recognised not just in terms of its economic return, but also in terms of its social, moral and material consequences (Shome & Hedge, 2002; Edwards, 2011). In an environment that demands social and moral engagement of PR practitioners as much as commercial return, a diverse practitioner body is more likely to have a greater awareness of the nuances of these effects and consider them in their practice (Zaharna, 2001; McKie & Munshi, 2007).

Others have argued for greater theoretical engagement with diversity (Sha & Ford, 2007). Pompper (2005), for example, suggested a fundamental re-positioning of concepts of ‘race’ and ethnicity and used CRT to analyse the current white, Western bias in PR practice and scholarship. CRT’s emphasis on socially constructed notions of ‘race’ shaping peoples’ lives through different forms of racial oppression, would focus attention on experiences of difference in the profession and provide space that
would validate the narratives of ‘other’ scholars and practitioners (Pompper, 2005; Edwards, 2009). CRT also recognises the intersectionality of our identities (Jordan-Zachery, 2007), which highlights the tendency for ‘requisite variety’ to pigeonhole practitioners (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Positioning the ‘other’ practitioner as a channel through which to communicate to specific ‘other’ markets risks essentialising both the practitioner and the target audience alike.

Both CRT and post-colonial approaches to diversity counter the dominant business case by introducing social and moral arguments in support of diversity that reference both historical context and current practice. These theoretical lenses marry well with socio-cultural approaches to PR and calls for professionals to use their skills in a way that will enhance society (e.g. Heath, 2006); the following section examines them in more detail, before applying them to the analysis of empirical data from the UK PR profession.

**Post-colonialism and CRT**

Both CRT and post-colonial theory situate the perspective of the ‘other’ at the centre, rather than the periphery, of research (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Munshi, 2005; Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007). Both approaches are inherently critical: their starting point is that discrimination is a fact of life for members of minoritised groups. Post-colonial scholars situate their analyses in the legacy of the systems of domination first established through colonialism and have focused in particular, though not exclusively, on the British Empire (Said, 1994; Shome & Hedge, 2002; Ashcroft et al., 1995). The origins of CRT lie in the legacy of slavery in the United States; US scholars have paid particular attention to its effects on law and education, while in the UK, a growing number of scholars are applying its key tenets to a range of contexts (Du Bois, 2007 [1903]; Valdes et al., 2002; Moran & Carbado, 2008; Hylton, 2009; Gillborn, 2008). The theoretical approaches are genetically linked and complementary: slavery was integral to empire-building and today, the processes of ‘othering’ that mark global trade relations are paralleled by discrimination against people from former colonies in domestic environments. As Appadurai (1996) argues, the flows of finance, culture, people and information that characterise globalisation ensure that these colonial and neo-colonial connections will remain, rather than disappear.

Both post-colonialism and CRT highlight the importance of not only historical, but also current contexts in understanding the experiences of minoritised individuals. In PR the daily lives of ‘other’ practitioners are shaped not only by their immediate workplace, but also by the broader professional and social environment in which their work is performed. In the UK and USA, these contexts are characterised by whiteness.

Whiteness is not merely a physical attribute. While ‘race’ is a primary social division that is used to classify individuals (Anthias, 2001), whiteness is more than this. It is a system of privilege, an orientation that serves as the norm against which all ‘others’ are measured and in the context of which our intersecting identities are classified (for example, Bangladeshi working-class woman or white middle-class man).
Forms of knowledge, assumptions, values and attitudes that determine privilege are rooted in whiteness and act as benchmarks for success, acceptability and belonging (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; Harris, 1993; Annisette, 2003). Those who cannot access whiteness can claim neither centrality nor legitimacy for their interests and identities, but must justify them in terms that whiteness can relate to (for example, justifying diversity in terms of a business case rather than a social and moral argument). Often, these terms are evident in discourses that circulate about the presence, place and relative value of diverse individuals. These discourses reflect the assumptions underpinning whiteness and reinforce structures that perpetuate its symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991), producing material effects in terms of the professional possibilities available to ‘others’.

Examining diversity in PR using these theoretical lenses, then, requires a critical approach to diversity in relation to whiteness. Paying attention only to this, however, neglects the ‘diverse voices and alternative rationalities’ (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007) of ‘other’ practitioners. Their experience allows normative discourses to be deconstructed revealing both the symbolic power that they exert and the spaces they leave for resistance. The next section illustrates how these two analytical approaches can work together.

### Normative discourses of diversity in UK PR practice

The UK Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) has a diversity programme, with two main objectives: ‘to develop a culture of diversity raising general awareness within the PR industry’ and ‘to increase the number of PR practitioners from diverse backgrounds’ (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2010a). Tactics comprise information dissemination; including diversity in training, education and networking events; measurement and evaluation of diversity in the industry; and stronger links with diversity-related partners. However, the programme is vague. It draws on the notion of requisite variety as a justification, fails to specify targets for the number of diverse practitioners in the industry, and contains little that would make concrete changes to the ‘raced’ and classed structures of the industry.

A diversity working group was set up in summer 2010 to develop specific actions relating to the programme, with the aim of completing its work by the end of 2011 (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2010b). This 18-month lifespan suggests a functional and task-oriented approach to diversity, rather than the long-term approach described in the overall programme. Moreover, the group is an ‘advisory board’, providing input into standing committees and ‘owned by the whole organisation rather than representing a particular group’. This may be an attempt to avoid marginalising diversity, but it is also likely to result in the advice being an ‘optional extra’ for the CIPR’s main committees. Consequently, diverse practitioners’ ‘place’ in the industry remains a kind of no-man’s land, relevant to all and owned by none. Their voices are only heard when they are functionally relevant to the task in hand.

The Public Relations Consultants Association (PR.CA), the second major industry body in the UK, has no diversity policy and makes little explicit mention of the topic.
in its literature. Instead it presents a picture of a talent-based meritocracy, neatly sidestepping any real engagement with ‘difference’ or social hierarchy. ‘In its openness, PR is unparalleled. It is a genuine democracy of talent, where background is irrelevant, and ability is all’ (Public Relations Consultants, Association, 2009b: 3).

In this discourse, openness implies variety, while merit implies neutrality; discrimination does not exist because the bases for discrimination are not relevant to the profession. Diversity is divorced from race, ethnicity, gender or other discriminatory axes and instead defined in terms of professional capital. ‘Consultancies are usually jam-packed with a diverse range of people who all bring different skills to the table whether it is their creative thinking, media contacts or client servicing skills’ (ibid.: 5).

In the Association’s ‘Benefits of Membership’ pamphlet (Public Relations Consultants Association, 2009a), no mention is made of diversity, despite a chapter on ‘Maximising Talent’ and some detail on the Association’s human resources (HR) and business development services to members. This reflects a general absence of discourses about diversity among consultancies. A review of the web sites of the top ten consultancies in the UK (PRWeek, 2009), conducted as part of this research, showed that diversity is most frequently presented not in terms of gender, race or class, but in terms of the range of professional experience and skills on which the organisation may draw.

Our people are an eclectic bunch, with diverse backgrounds including advertising, research, journalism, banking, politics, consultancy and in-house communications. All are united by a passion and flair for communications, as well as a sense of hard work and fun.

(http://www.fishburn-hedges.com/aboutus, retrieved 5 January 2010)

Given the under-representation of minoritised groups in professional environments, this description can also be read as a confirmation of the whiteness of the consultancy environment.

Where cultural diversity is mentioned explicitly by consultancies, it underpins a concrete business benefit. A foundation for sociable, creative work environments, ‘diversity’ implies talented, strong-minded individuals that deliver to a client’s communications requirements. ‘[The] rich variety of backgrounds, cultures, experiences – and attitudes – provide a mass of creative “raw material” that is shaped into great ideas’ (http://www.hillandknowlton.co.uk/Creative-pulse, retrieved 4 January 2010).

While this interpretation of diversity implies cultural difference, it depends on a conception of diversity as the exotic spectacle, a source of inspiration and pleasure that simultaneously confirms the superiority of whiteness (Farley, 2002). It remains remote and largely unproblematic. The phrase ‘raw material’ is reminiscent of the ‘raw materials’, including labour, that were imported from colonies as part of the empire-building process. Like those raw materials, diversity cannot be used without being ‘shaped’; left alone, undisciplined, it may produce something unintended and inappropriate. Thus, as long as diverse practitioners are managed and their inspirational exoticism directed appropriately, they provide a source of pleasure (for others) and productivity (in business terms) rather than conflict.
Sometimes the ‘diverse practitioner’ is presented more specifically as a source of creativity and insight into multicultural markets. This version of the business case, closely related to the notion of requisite variety, is illustrated in a report from Weber Shandwick UK, the only UK-based consultancy to have a specific division devoted to multicultural communications (Weber Shandwick, 2007). The report presents a picture of socially mobile (non-white) ethnic populations with increasing spending power and specific media and brand preferences. Emphasising the market opportunities available to companies who take these multicultural audiences seriously, the reader is urged to make the most of this source of income by communicating more effectively.

[The] Head of Multi-Cultural Communications at Weber Shandwick states: ‘As the UK becomes increasingly diverse, companies are steadily realising the opportunities of communicating to the multi-cultural market, but it is apparent that many still do not fully understand how to effectively tune in’. (Weber Shandwick, 2007: 3)

These normative conceptions of diversity, then, are safe and attractive for PR insofar as they are low-risk, low-cost and beneficial to clients and consultancy alike. ‘Other’ practitioners will be successful if they ‘blend in’ and provide creative inspiration and apply their cultural knowledge in the service of the industry and its clients. They should not challenge the smooth running of the work environment (Carbado & Gulati, 2003; Ahmed, 2009). This, of course, leads to conflict. They may appear different, but they are not permitted to be too different. On one hand, their ethnicity is relevant; on the other, they must continually adjust their identity to whiteness such that they fit in, embodying only the merit-based discourses of professional diversity that circulate in their environment. The profession does not see this conflict because whiteness is invisible if you live it; it is simply an ‘orientation’ that all those around you share (Ahmed, 2007) and on which the criteria for merit-based judgements are based. Since merit dispenses with the need to recognise the ‘other’ there is no conflict between whiteness and merit: the one reinforces the other. Why, then, would ‘others’ need to adjust? To what?

‘Other’ voices

Under the rhetoric of ‘managing diversity’, ‘others’ become the exemplar of diversity, the demonstration of the business case, who adopt or remove ethnicity depending on its commercial utility. They enhance the work environment because they embody a valuable asset that is turned to the business’ advantage in the form of insight, creativity and entertainment.

For ‘other’ practitioners, however, this sanitised version of diversity could not be further from their experience. They live in the context of being ‘different’, and manage this difference on a daily basis. Difference, here, relates not to simple characteristics, but to hierarchical and value-driven relations between groups.
(Flintoff et al., 2008). It is complex, personal and cannot be divorced from the power that circulates within the profession, determining who is ‘appropriate’ and who is not. Difference is not simply a business accessory; it is visceral, a source of power over ‘others’, and a reservoir on which these ‘others’ draw to resist that power.

The slippery place of ethnicity in the normative discourse of diversity and merit presents a major difficulty that practitioners constantly juggle. On the one hand, ethnicity is the prism through which difference is perceived and through which it is transformed into a professional attribute. On the other, the colour-blind notion of merit means it is irrelevant. In practice, this discourse has a number of material effects on the working lives of practitioners from minoritised groups negotiating their way through the profession.

First, merit requires specific efforts on the part of practitioners to manage their identity. Fahim, for example, who is in the early stages of his career, makes his ethnicity less, rather than more, relevant when engaging with other practitioners: ‘It’s almost like you have to mentally prep to up your game and pretend that you’re something or another that would be in line a bit more with them.’ This is not necessarily negative because, while ethnicity can be an advantage, it is also perceived by whiteness as a surrogate for skill, a process that is recognised and rejected by Fahim. Masking ethnicity moves the focus back to merit-based criteria as the justification for a claim to membership of the field: ‘I want someone to look at me and look at what I can do, and what skills I can bring as opposed to, “Oh, yeah, he’s good at his job, oh and a bonus is he’s Asian”’. He rejects the implication in diversity discourses that his ethnicity is the main aspect of his identity: ‘I am me. I happen to be Muslim. I happen to be Asian. I happen to be male. I happen to come from Birmingham. And yes that’s shaped me and made me the person I am, but essentially I am me.’

Similarly, the essentialist nature of managing diversity, which positions difference purely in terms of ethnicity, is frustrating because it ignores the individual’s professional skills. ‘[T]here’s this belief that diversity equals ethnicity and I think that from my experience that’s not … that’s oversimplifying the whole argument’ (Alison). This simplistic notion of diversity is not merely discursive, but shapes professional experience insofar as it overshadows merit.

Despite your own ability, qualifications, experience, day to day you encounter and come up against people [for whom] none of that actually is relevant, because if you’re giving them good counsel on a particular issue that just happens to be quite close to your own ethnicity or culture, they draw the wrong kind of parallels.

(Arun)

The apparent immutability of merit is also challenged by Sarah, a senior practitioner, who rejects notions of colour-blindness and recognises that in practice, merit involves judgements that are shaped by the inescapability of ethnicity as a primary social definer. This becomes her focus for resistance: she demands a fundamental change in
the assumptions whiteness makes about practitioners from minoritised groups. Her business case is not related to requisite variety, but to the generic business context.

It’s not colour blindness that we want people to have, I think it is recognising that it makes good business [...] to have diverse people, not just at the junior levels but representing your company, managing your money, making important key decisions in your business, and they are able to do that.

(Sarah)

Many practitioners recognised implicit discrimination in the profession, but explicitly addressing this is difficult because of the absence of discursive tools available in a business environment shaped by whiteness. Discrimination based on ethnicity does not exist because merit-based benchmarks do not acknowledge ethnicity. Merit, however, is not objectively measured and frequently involves personal rather than role-specific criteria, more available to those who inhabit whiteness than those outside it. Judgements are shaped by perceptions that the ‘other’ practitioner does not speak appropriately, does not look appropriate, is not capable of the level of strategic thinking required, or will not mix well because they are perceived to have little in common with white colleagues.

I’ve had people think that obviously because I’m from the Caribbean I don’t know very much. I don’t necessarily talk like a black British person, I sound different from other people. I think that has caused people to be surprised. I’ve spoken to people on the phone and then gone to meet them and they’re like, ‘Ha!’ Surprised.

(Alison)

The personal nature of these criticisms leaves many practitioners with an internal struggle between ‘resilience and confidence on the one hand, and disappointment and vulnerability on the other’ (Winant, 2006: 988), as Lucy’s comments illustrate:

A number of times [...] I was overlooked for promotion, people came in after me, got pay rises and moved on and I was still in the same position. I kept on having reviews and I was told that I was doing great, a great job, so it kind of made me question, you know, what do I need to do to prove myself? [...] I don’t leave, you know, this sort of stigmatisation (sic). I don’t know if it’s to do with the fact that [...] I’m not very, you know, if you put me in a room I don’t stand out necessarily, but that’s not to say that I don’t work hard or that I don’t achieve what I need to in my job.

(Lucy)

Aside from the difficulty of addressing discrimination as a factor in career progression, topics relating to ethnicity are silenced because of the general lack of discourse around difference. While diversity policies may be common, they are recognised as window dressing; they do not open the door to difference.
Diversity is taken for granted. Even those that are responsible for excluding people into those positions of power, they still speak a language of diversity, they understand the importance of doing things the right way and I guess it then makes it harder for us to sort of say, ‘This is what our achievement is, there it is, it’s very tangible, it’s black and white, boom there you go’.

(Peter)

Political correctness also extends to interpersonal relations, where ‘difference’ is avoided because it makes visible whiteness, the ‘other’ and the distance between them, raising the possibility of ‘difficult’ diversity. Fear of offending the ‘other’ means difference remains unspoken, which exacerbates the situation and further entrenches its absence in normative discourse. In situations where difference becomes starkly obvious, things become awkward, as Caroline notes:

[T]here is just that, ‘We’re not used to dealing with those sorts of people’, or ‘Those sorts of people are only fit for certain situations’. So, [ … ] ‘ … to have them sitting round a board table on equal terms … it’s outside of my reality and I don’t know how to treat them, I don’t know how to behave’.

(Caroline)

This obstructs the development of productive personal relationships, as Sarah comments: ‘Human interaction requires you to interact as a whole being, you can’t sort of slice off one bit of who you are and engage, there’s always going to be a dis-connect.’ The onus remains on the ‘different’ practitioners to lubricate the situation by accommodating whiteness, making others feel at ease either by masking their ethnicity or by introducing it in a manageable, non-threatening way.

I didn’t want anyone to feel pressurised [ … ] I didn’t want to ruin – not ruin – disrupt people’s days so not, you know, say ‘I can’t do a meeting at half past twelve because that’s my prayer time’. So I’d sort the prayers so you can fit them in.

(Aadila)

The lived experience of difference in these narratives contrasts starkly with the sanitised notions of diversity that PR theory and professional discourse promote. This is revealed when the voices of ‘other’ practitioners are given centre-stage. Only then does the impact of hollow, functional discourses of diversity on their professional identity, career development and networks become clear.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to ‘denaturalize’ (Shome & Hedge, 2002) discourses of diversity in public relations. It has exposed the difference between the discourse and the lived experience that the discourse produces in the UK profession. As Bourdieu
argues, dominant groups ‘[conceal] the function of division beneath the function of
communication: the culture which unifies (the medium of communication) is also
the culture which separates (the instrument of distinction) and which legitimates dis-
tinctions by forcing all other cultures (designated as sub-cultures) to define themselves
by their distance from the dominant culture’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 167). In PR, dis-
courses of diversity help to reinforce whiteness as the instrument of distinction, and
categorise ‘other’ professionals as those who must measure up to its norms. In this
way, whiteness is served by notions of diversity, even as it uses them to demonstrate
its apparent openness. The analysis presented here has demonstrated how the unity
implied by abstract notions of diversity and merit, simultaneously defines ‘others’ and
removes the possibility for them to articulate their own experience. Indeed, the co-option
of whiteness as the lens through which to view what is, and can only be, their
experience is another layer of ‘othering’ in the workplace to which these practitioners
are required to submit.

In this sense, PR may be regarded as a site where social racialism is practised – a
process whereby ‘certain characteristics [are attributed] to certain groups, and racial
differences [are explained] as the natural outcome of meritocracy and the free play of
the market’ (Chang, 2002: 88). Judgements are made about individuals’ professional
competence and belonging based on their ethnicity, even as merit and managing
diversity appeal to meritocratic ideals and deny the existence of discrimination.
Consequently, there are currently no means to articulate the lived experiences of
difference that characterise ‘other’ practitioners’ lives. The business case for diversity
offers no scope to object to this; the social and moral case, on the other hand, defines
such an outcome as failure. Should this dynamic continue, the danger is that PR, as a
powerful discursive force in society, will contribute to, rather than combat, oppression
and discrimination.

By integrating post-colonialism and CRT into PR scholarship, and adopting a
consistently political and critical stance to the profession, we can begin to remedy this
situation. Examining campaign planning and tactics using CRT, for example, could
focus analysis on the categorisations associated with ‘diverse audiences’, what
assumptions about those audiences are being made in the process of categorising
them, and how those assumptions limit the possibilities of their engagement. Simi-
larly, the structures of different professional fields can be examined using a post-
colonial perspective to explore how the identity of PR in different countries reflects
not only cultural difference but also the dynamics of globalisation and neo-colonial
positioning in their aims and aspirations. These, and other projects would provide
a platform for ‘othered’ voices, including ‘other’ practitioners as well as ‘other’ forms
of practice and scholarship in countries that are currently treated as ‘the edge’ of our
Western-centric field (Petelin, 2005). As a ‘radical’ socio-cultural view suggests, the
interaction of these voices with the structures and cultures of public relations does not
just add to the list of alternative views of PR, but will initiate new conversations that
themselves produce new forms of practice and new understandings of how PR and
society are sustained, reproduced and potentially altered through the engagement of
the ‘traditional’ practitioner and the ‘other’.
Note

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References and further reading


Public relations is typically founded upon an anticipation of prosperity, which in turn is based on dominant commercial or capitalist foundations. As has been argued by authors elsewhere in this volume (Edwards and Hodges, Introduction to this book; see also McKie & Munshi, 2007, 2005; Munshi & Kurian, 2005; Pal & Dutta, 2008; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Dutta, 2007; Dutta & DeSouza, 2008; Jacobson, 2003; Escobar, 1995), much public relations scholarship furthers mercantile approaches that legitimise the interests of organisations, using public relations activity at ‘meso’ or ‘macro’ levels. In contrast, public relations at the ‘micro’, or community level, may emphasise ‘communicative’ social action and the social and cultural responsibilities associated with such activity (Holtzhausen, 2005). Community owned communication initiatives have the potential to drive the ‘mass shift in attitude’ needed to tackle the significant issues of our time (King, 2010) and is often regarded as more dynamic and relational than dominant process driven and goal-oriented practice. The key to this is to encourage support from the bottom up, not ‘buy in’ from the top down.

Public relations work at community level remains under-explored. In this chapter, we begin by critically reviewing some of the persistent ideas which have formed the basis of academic discussions of public relations ethics – ‘communitarianism’, ‘dialogue’ and ‘symmetrical communication.’ Emphasising the significance of context, as outlined in the introduction to this volume, we go on to consider how two-way communication has been conceptualised in a post-colonial Latin America, as a participatory process of co-creating knowledge. We explore the potential for PR in community facilitation using a case study of a youth-led health communication project in Peru. We draw particular attention to how the communication activities used in this case differ from Western notions of PR, traditionally driven by marketing and concerned with using mass media to create a favourable feeling among publics towards corporations and their change agenda (Munshi & Kurian, 2005).
advocate a shift in PR at community level beyond disseminating information, toward approaches where communication practices might serve the genuine concerns of citizens, and where practitioners encourage activity which promotes empowerment and collaboration (Pal & Dutta, 2008; Tufte, 2005; Martinez, 2007; Tilson & Alozie, 2004).

The communitarian agenda

Our argument so far suggests that PR at community level would require a communal orientation. The communal ‘turn’ is not new in public relations theory building. It has been largely based on Kruckeberg & Starck’s (1988) work on PR as a community building function, which suggests that PR ‘is better defined and practiced as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community’ (1998: xi). Such scholarly efforts, it might be argued, have been an extension of the communitarian agenda, which took hold in the United States during the 1990s. The communitarian emphasis on community and social responsibility shaped by core US American values of fairness, democracy and truth (Leeper, 1996: 168) has been proposed by some as a worldwide ethical base for PR practice. Our concern is that a communitarian philosophy would advocate paternalistic approaches, in which the organisation provides for the needs of a community without creating opportunities for the people to exercise their own rights or responsibilities (Dudley, 1993: 8), and where the aim of PR activity would be to ‘sav[e] the moral and civil order of communities’ (Etzioni, 1993: 20).

Despite being ‘pluralist’ in name, communitarianism fails to recognise the diversity of thought and values. Leeper (1996: 167) suggests that communitarianism is focused on ‘maintaining a supra-community, a community of communities – the American society’. This has strong undertones of an overarching ideology, where communitarian efforts might be linked to a particular political or economic agenda. This would raise ethical concerns for PR, which is recognised as largely providing counsel to dominant institutions within societies. We suggest that ‘collective’ understandings of ‘fairness’, ‘truth’ and ‘dialogue’ will be shaped by the historical and socio-cultural contexts relevant to specific communities, which requires us to broaden our perspective of PR. Scholars have begun to embrace more ‘postmodern’ approaches for PR to help to address some of the ‘crises’ of modernity, such as social exclusion and environmental degradation, through dialogic practice (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Botan & Taylor, 2004; Bruning et al., 2004). There has been some ambiguity surrounding the meaning and use of the term ‘dialogue’, however (Kent & Taylor, 2002: 21). Often studies have referred to ‘dialogue’ as ‘dialectic’ or ‘discourse’ and dialogic processes have been equated with the advocacy function of PR involving ‘consultation’, ‘debate’ or ‘rhetorical dialogue’ (Heath, 2000). Again, studies of PR rhetoric have focused on the potential rewards for the organisation, using functionalist language to emphasise the benefits from ‘increased public support, enhanced image/reputation, and decreased governmental interference’ (Kent & Taylor, 2002: 30).
Dialogue and symmetrical communication

What exactly is meant by dialogue is unclear (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The ‘dominant paradigm’ within PR suggests that two-way symmetrical PR indicates a dialogue, and also suggests that this is what communication teams should strive for (McKie & Munshi, 2007). Symmetrical communication, as advocated by Grunig & Hunt (1984), would be two-way but would nevertheless remain controlled by the information source (Chae, 2008). Such work is participatory only in a very instrumental sense, employed to achieve the aims determined a priori to local expression of opinion and needs. Symmetrical communication here would be closer to systems theory than to genuine dialogue, emphasising process and omitting the interplay of many actors, varying power relations, cultural context and rituals, and multiple interpretations of relationships. Symmetrical communication could therefore be perceived as manipulation ‘dressed up’ as paternalism (Dudley, 1993: 8). In contrast, genuine dialogue would view participants as ‘persons and not as objects and participants should work to maintain relationships of “equality”’ (Kent & Taylor, 2002: 25).

While dialogue has become part of the public relations vocabulary, a ‘coherent discussion of how dialogic approaches might actually be used by public relations practitioners and scholars’ (Kent & Taylor, 2002: 24) has, so far, been lacking, particularly within the context of public relations at community level. How might public relations techniques, as we understand them in a ‘Western’ context, be used to engage with more marginalised, or ‘seldom heard’ voices?

The knowledge, skills and values constituting the PR ‘profession’ may be in tension with the norms, values and practices of the particular group of people, or ‘culture’ with whom they seek to communicate (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2001). For example, what would count as genuine participation and how would attitudes towards participation be shaped by these cultural values and norms? Mutuality between the media and public relations practitioners has long been recognised but what about other forms of public relations practice where the media is not the most relied upon tool of communication? (Kent & Taylor, 2002). A local government campaign seeking to encourage healthy eating among school age children in a ‘socially deprived’ district within a UK city is unlikely to be effective if its success depends entirely on media relations and other promotional efforts, such as advertising, poster campaigns and leaflets. In communities often dominated by social deprivation and limited access to information, how would this strategy be relevant? What would be required in such cases is an integrated approach that includes what we might recognise as more ‘typical’ PR tactics alongside more interpersonal, grass roots forms of communication using a ‘language’ which speaks directly to publics, and seeks to engage them in ongoing conversation (Gadamer, 1994: 116). Culture here would not only change ‘the context of communication but also the way in which communication takes place’ (Holtzhausen, 2005: 412). We argue that PR has much to learn from communication theory that has emerged from the post–colonial context (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007: 254; Banerjee & Linstead, 2004), in this case Latin America, where the social ‘ills’ of modernity have been part of day–to–day experience since colonial times (Castro-Gómez, 2001).
Defining social transformation

We use ‘communication for social transformation’ deliberately in the place of ‘development communication’ as the concept of transformation ‘does not imply any predetermined outcome, or that the process is essentially a positive one’ (Castles, 2000: 2). Our discussion here is influenced by ‘social communication’, or what is increasingly referred to as ‘Communication for Social Change’ (CFSC) which advocates non-mercantile models of communication that incorporate interpersonal and relational practices and explores ‘alternative ways for social change through popular participation and dialogue’ (Chae, 2008: 1; Martinez, 2007; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Dutta, 2007; Dutta & DeSouza, 2008; and Dutta & Basu, 2008). Communication for social change has been defined in Servaes (2008: 14–15) as:

a process of public and private dialogue through which people themselves define who they are, what they need and how to get what they need in order to improve their own lives. It utilizes dialogue that leads to collective problem identification, decision making and community-based implementation of solutions to development issues.

(Servaes, 2008: 14–15)

It is concerned with facilitating networks and exchange between individuals and groups and strengthening the capacity of the people to express themselves in order to influence and shape change.

It is important to note at this point that ‘social communication’ is not the same as ‘social marketing’ which has its foundations in modernist diffusion communication and is defined by Andreasen (1994: 110) as ‘the adaptation of commercial marketing technologies to programs designed to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences to improve their personal welfare and that of the society of which they are part’. The Bolivian ‘communicologist’, Luis Ramiro Beltrán (1976), argues that social marketing favours the interests of dominant institutions (both domestic and international) by ‘persuading people to engage in behaviours that are predetermined by others and not the people themselves’ (Singh, 2009: 6). Instead, scholars of CFSC seek alternatives to dominant practices (Escobar, 1995) and are concerned with participatory communication (Petersone, 2007; Beltrán, 1993; Bhaba, 1994; Gamucio Dagron, 2001; Huesca, 2002; McKee, 1994; Servaes, 1997; Pretty & Chambers, 1993).

Communication for Social Transformation is particularly relevant in post-colonial contexts, where the work and roles of public relations professionals are enacted in the context of conflict and fragmented social systems. In many communities in Latin America, people have low levels of trust in many aspects of their daily lives (Albert, 1996; Archer and Fitch, 1994). They do not easily trust other citizens, the media, or government institutions and tend to look inwards towards the family, their ‘in-groups’ and other smaller units within their community (García Canclini, 2001). Scholars and practitioners associated with communication have consequently been
engaged in ‘passionate disputes’ over what makes communication ‘authentic’ (Jacobson, 2003: 1), both in terms of message construction and innovative and creative ways of communicating. It is their belief that only by working with the people could anything authentic be achieved (Freire, 1973). Communication in the post-colonial Latin American context would not just involve disseminating information but also co-creating knowledge. As Servaes (2008: 79) suggests, CFSC would seek to draw a ‘neat line’ between ‘information activities that aim to build the external “image” of a programme or project, and the communication activities that should be inseparable from programme activities at the community level.’ PR practitioners, therefore, would not only be engaged in message construction but in co-creation activities, for example, educational workshops, street theatre, council meetings, across a wide variety of audiences with a range of literacy levels and indigenous languages.

Non-Western PR: a developing world perspective

Numerous communication projects call themselves ‘two-way’ (Grunig, 1992) and ‘participatory’ when, in fact, they are participatory in only a very narrow sense of the word. ‘Symmetry’ and ‘participation’ have become almost ‘slogans’ (Gerace, 1973; Jacobson, 2003) for PR practice. In contrast, Luis Ramiro Beltrán’s theory of Horizontal Communication (1976, 1979, 1993, 2005) claims that there are no insurmountable limits to growth and that communication practitioners should be guided by social needs, not profit motives (Beltrán, 1993). Horizontal communication pushes for ‘structured change for a new society based on equality and clear participation of the people in decision making and protection of the environment’ (Beltrán, 2005: 16). It provides an alternative to the vertical, ‘top-down’ or ‘domineering, imposing monological [models of] communication’ (Beltrán, 1979, in Gamucio Dagron & Tufte, 2006: 167; see also Chambers, 1994), which have traditionally colonised the development arena.

Horizontal communication proposes that all members of a community would have equal rights to communication resources and access to information. From Beltrán’s perspective, participants would be engaged in ongoing conversations and sender–receiver roles would become horizontal in terms of power distribution, emphasising meaning over information transmission (Servaes, 1997). Horizontal communication approaches would therefore contribute to ongoing citizenship building understood as ‘the process of democratic social interaction, based on exchange of symbols, by which human beings voluntarily share experiences under conditions of free and egalitarian access, dialogue, and participation’ (Beltrán, 2005: 21) and serve as a ‘vehicle of expressive and social and political participation of citizens, as an instrument for diagnosing and finding solutions to local problems in the communities’ (Flores Beregal, 2002 in Beltrán, 2005: 30).

Like Beltrán, the Brazilian-born pedagogue, Paulo Freire (2005, 2004, 1973, 1972), was concerned with horizontal education and advocated authentic dialogue, reflexive action and liberation from dominant structures. Freire argues that reality is a dynamic process that is co-created and re-produced by people who are able to reflect
on their existing knowledge and experience. Giving space and validity to many, often marginalised, voices, Freire’s critical consciousness model inspired the revision of the classic communication model, towards models rooted in dialogue and discussion, aimed at personal transformation and social change (Freire, 1973: 41–78). According to Freire’s ideas, using communication merely as a means to ‘deposit’ information, practitioners would not make any lasting difference to the community. Knowledge should instead be socially constructed, produced and interpreted within individuals’ different social and political circumstances resulting in multiple views of the world (Scoones & Thompson, 1993: 9).

Freire and Beltrán’s work has not been without criticism and advocates of their approaches have often been regarded as ‘anarchists’ or ‘troublemakers’ (Barranquero, 2005: 14; Gerace, 1973; Marques de Melo, 1999; CILA, 2006) who threaten existing hierarchies by proposing a utopian vision of community. Critics have also suggested that the methods associated with their ideas are too abstract, designed on very basic assumptions and political realities (Cohn, 1988: 8–14). Acknowledging these criticisms, both Beltrán and Freire’s work is grounded in reflections of community experience and the communication successes and failures in the field, not abstract theorising. This suggests that their approaches to communicating for social transformation would be more appropriate in post-colonial contexts than Grunig and Hunt’s 2-way symmetrical model, offering an alternative which Riano (1994, in Gamucio Dagron & Tufte, 2006: 12) suggests is more ‘democratic’, acknowledging ‘the right to share and receive information and to construct cultural spaces’.

**Participation in social transformation**

In participatory communication, priority is given to people and relationships rather than tasks, structures or tangible sources. This ‘rich’, relational communication goes much further than the contact outlined by Taylor (2004: 151). It is based on the notion that people will possess a greater knowledge of the issues affecting them than ‘experts’ (Wolfe, 2006: 10). Drawing on their own experiences would enable the community to take ownership of communication activity which involves processes that encourage the ‘imagining’ of alternatives. In doing so, communities could take control of their own lives and develop the confidence, knowledge and skills necessary to potentially influence public policies through communication and media production and the expression of popular culture (Riano, 1994 in Gamucio Dagron & Tufte, 2006: 9; Servaes, 2008). Significantly, this emphasis on ‘ownership’ differentiates participatory communication from the model of two-way symmetrical practice. In the two-way model, public and private organisations are encouraged to meet in the middle and create a ‘win-win’ scenario, suggesting that each party makes compromises to accommodate the other. In participatory communication, the community takes the lead and the resulting communication is generated from the bottom up.

One example of a more culturally sensitive and personalised form of social communication at community level is the Asociación Kallpa/CUSO/VSO project in El Porvenir, a marginalised ‘barrio’ (neighbourhood) in the Peruvian city of Iquitos on the edge of the Amazon rainforest. Asociación Kallpa describes itself as a ‘creative and innovative organisation committed to human development that seeks to improve the quality of life of children and adolescents from underprivileged backgrounds’ (http://www.kallpa.org.pe). Their focus is on strengthening knowledge and access to health care and the social skills of young people. They believe that ‘intercultural understanding … participation in public and private networks, and the capacity to propose policies for health and social education’ (http://www.kallpa.org.pe) contributes to the success of their projects.

The Iquitos Youth Project (running at the time of writing) combines participatory approaches and popular media activities to enable the community to reflect upon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal of communication</th>
<th>Type of participation</th>
<th>Interpretation of empowerment</th>
<th>Information flow or type of message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating people to take control of their own lives</td>
<td>Interaction between information source and message receivers</td>
<td>Redistribution of power from elites to local communities.</td>
<td>Participatory message development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce knowledge gap by learning through participation</td>
<td>Co-creation of knowledge from participatory research and needs assessment – through cultural production – to final evaluation</td>
<td>Empowerment as enabling</td>
<td>Top-down and bottom-up information flow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage understanding between organisations, institutions and the people</td>
<td>Ordinary people as key agents of change facilitated by intermediaries</td>
<td>Acquiring knowledge and status to enable communities to take control of their lives</td>
<td>Two-way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage organisational and sociocultural change</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence public policies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Capacity to benefit from involvement methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act</td>
<td></td>
<td>Spontaneous and unrehearsed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Asociación Kallpa and the Iquitos Youth Project, Peru
their life conditions. The focus of this health communication project is to co-create knowledge and understandings of a ‘healthy community’ and ‘healthy living’ and to encourage a change in policy and reallocation of resources, particularly water, sewerage and rubbish collection, in a neighbourhood where basic public services were scarce or, at best, precarious. A further objective of the project, developed in light of the key issues identified by the young people, is to raise awareness of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease.

Over one-third of the 700 people living in El Porvenir are aged between 12 and 24, and the majority has limited access to education. Additional investment in the young people through education and training is, therefore, essential for the sustainability of the community. The project seeks to promote youth engagement in the community, specifically the processes of co-creating participatory messages. This was formed from a needs assessment using focus groups and in-depth interviews. Sessions were held on participative management approaches including diagnosis and problem prioritisation, tools of communication and building youth networks and alliances with local institutions. Using the information collected through participatory diagnostic workshops and meetings, forms of ‘popular communication’ (Riano, 1994 in Gamucio Dagon & Tufte: 449) were used to develop a ‘language’ and ‘process’ of communication that was owned by the community. For example, the young people produced a leaflet, ‘Knowing my town’, based on the data they had collected from a house to house diagnostic survey.

Iquitos is not unlike any other city or community in the Amazon, in that it is characterised by artistic traditions. Amazon tribes and rural towns tend to communicate their thoughts and feelings through dancing, singing, body painting, etc. and festivals are seen as an important part of community life. Games and cultural workshops including painting, theatre and film-making activities were, therefore, introduced by Asociación Kallpa as participatory methods to capture the imagination of the young people. One group decorated t-shirts with key messages relating to teen-age pregnancy such as ‘wear a condom’ and ‘wait before having sex’, while another produced poster size cartoon strips. A further group created a play entitled ‘What an excellent idea’, in which they told of the experiences of a community on the banks of the river who upon realising the importance of keeping the river clean, collectively developed initiatives to do just that.

The El Porvenir project is not without its challenges. The community had previous experience of NGO activity and was initially wary of an outside organisation they feared had come in to their neighbourhood to tell them what to do. The project sought to cross these cultural boundaries by being respectful to the Peruvian jungle tradition of ‘la minga’, which, when translated literally, means the gathering of all the peoples or a collective action to work for the good of the community. The generational gap can also often lead to distrust among participants in community projects of this nature. There had previously been little dialogue between the young people and adults in the community. Existing community leaders and groups of elders may have taken offence at a group of young people full of energy and new ideas who, upon recognising the power of speaking out, wanted to use their newly-found ‘voice’ to
affect change. Such forms of behaviour are often perceived as back talk or showing a lack of respect towards elders. One of the first steps, therefore, was to establish interest groups – one for the young people and another for adults and community leaders. These groups provide a space for interested people to unite behind the cause – that is, the promotion of a more healthy community and to contribute their unique skills to the collective effort. Furthermore, by creating spaces where both groups could share experiences and exchange ideas about the issues concerning their community, the project is able to show that inter-generational differences need not be an obstacle to change.

In the case of El Porvenir, participatory communication was about respecting both the individual and collective agency and dignity of young people and the elders. The activities to mobilise the community and use of folk media are examples of ‘action oriented towards understanding’ (Jacobson, 2003: 18), where participants could call attitudes and traditions towards their environment into question, to introduce new ideas and express their opinions and needs in ways meaningful to their own experiences.

**Communication intermediaries and social transformation**

This project is notable for the obvious absence of a formal public relations function or professional with the occupational title ‘public relations practitioner’. Instead, the communications function was carried by the project coordinators who acted as communication intermediaries involved in community mobilisation, talking to people regularly (almost every day), organising activities where issues were discussed and acted upon, facilitating situations for participatory decision-making and helping the community to challenge some of the political and social barriers imposed upon them. It was not only the professionals working on the project who served as intermediaries, but also the young people. The neighbourhood ‘beauty queen’, for example, played an important role in facilitating access to younger people in the early stages of the project as did the initial members of the youth and adult interest groups.

An outline of the ‘Asociación Kalpa/ CUSO/VSO’ communication strategy in El Porvenir and the role of the communication intermediary is outlined in Table 6.2.

As Wolfe (2006: 10–11) argues, in participatory approaches to communication, ‘[t]here are multiple functions that intermediaries may undertake beyond disseminating information including providing a platform for multiple perspectives, advocacy, facilitating interaction and stimulating discussion, and assisting in processes of mutual learning’. Within this context, the role of intermediaries as introduced in the introduction to this volume as well as in the contributions from Hodges and Elmer, is subject to reinterpretation. Rather than operating as mediators to impart existing knowledge (common in Western models of PR), intermediaries engage in a process of mutual learning with the community and through a process of dialogue, reflection and practice they co-construct new knowledge (Van de Veld, 2002; Wolfe, 2006). Central to this is that the community does not rely on the public sector, NGOs or corporations to shape the agenda.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Type of participation</th>
<th>Communication intermediary involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create knowledge and understanding of healthy living and the development of a healthy community</td>
<td>Create adult and youth fora Run cleaning campaigns, house cleaning and painting contests, mural painting, “Pasacalles” (a parade of lively folkdance popular in the Peruvian Andes), street theatre, community sports day and painting rubbish bins</td>
<td>Co-creation of knowledge</td>
<td>Establishing trust between adult and youth groups, negotiating for and gathering resources for activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourage change in policy to reallocate public resources</td>
<td>Create adult and youth fora Run thematic workshops on solid waste management, violence prevention, sex education and recycling Run workshops to nurture the artistic talent and personal development of young people and to teach care of the environment (recycling).</td>
<td>Co-creation of knowledge Community members as agents of change</td>
<td>Establishing trust between adult and youth groups, negotiating access to policy makers, negotiate resources for workshops, facilitate workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise awareness of teen pregnancy and STDs</td>
<td>Participatory workshop – diagnose and prioritise problems, develop plan, establish macro and micro projects</td>
<td>Community members as agents of change</td>
<td>Negotiate resources for workshops, facilitate workshops, negotiating for and gathering resources for activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is a broader interpretation of the role of public relations than that offered by Western models. For Grunig (1992) the ‘strategic knowledge’ of a public relations practitioner is at the very core of communication excellence. Communications approaches are then viewed as processes where experts transfer their knowledge to less informed people and judgements about what is ‘good’ and ‘relevant’ information are influenced by the interests, world views and environment of the organisation (Wolfe, 2006: 5). Importantly, from the perspective of PR ‘excellence’ (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) indigenous tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1967) held by cultures and passed on through generations orally, for example through stories, songs or poetry would be marginalised, as it would be ‘indicative of the possibilities of multiple perceptions and variable contexts, therefore contradicting the notion of objective knowledge’ (Wolfe, 2006: 7). This would have implications for communication practitioners as intermediaries, as the institutions the community associates them with, will determine the value that is given to the information that they transfer (Saywell & Cotton, 1999).

Conclusion

Public relations professionals ‘engage in relationships with media, community leaders, and other individuals on a daily basis’ (Kent & Taylor, 2002: 30). Yet, our discussion of communication for social transformation has suggested that public relations activity in this context would be more than a transfer of information; instead, it would form part of a social process in which organisations would invest time in developing relationships with people based on mutual trust in order to understand and appreciate their point of view.

As we saw above, the Iquitos project is notable for the obvious absence of a recognised public relations function. While some of the terminology used in this health promotion project may not be unfamiliar to a PR practitioner, how such terms are conceptualised will be quite different. Unlike the ‘win-win’ scenario associated with the two way symmetrical model of public relations, the activities in El Porvenir focus on communication from the bottom up. The organisations co-ordinating the project on the ground and those sponsoring the activities are silent partners: they do not see the campaign as an opportunity to raise their own profiles.

In contrast to mercantile orientations that have dominated interpretations of public relations, communication for social transformation offers an alternative to the top-down, PR and mass communication approaches. The role of mass media communication in spreading awareness of social issues should not be dismissed, but for processes during which individuals and communities make decisions and co-create strategies for changing behaviour, personal communication is far more likely to be effective (Servaes, 2008). Knowledge of ‘horizontal’ and ‘participatory’ communication with their focus on a ‘receiver-centric’ orientation and reflexive communicative action has much to contribute to the existing literature on dialogue and relationship building in public relations (Chia, 2005; Bruning et al., 2004; Botan & Taylor, 2004; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000; Broom et al., 1997).
The ideas we present in this chapter are not intended as an ‘all-embracing approach’ (Servaes, 2008), and are particularly relevant to the Latin American experience. Participatory communication is largely applicable to community level situations and cannot necessarily be applied to communication at national or international levels with the same level of engagement and ownership. However, we argue that Western PR scholarship has much to learn from a participatory approach to communication and engaging publics. For example, in cities throughout the world there will be pockets of social and economic deprivation and groups marginalised due to ethnicity, faith, gender, age, class, social stigma etc. Such communities, traditionally regarded as ‘hard to reach’, may benefit from more embedded communication approaches that focus on them rather than on the predefined targets of an outside organisation.

While participatory perspectives have found support among communication scholars, policy makers, development organisations and publics (Servaes, 2008: 218), there is a clear need for more academic analysis; in particular, of the work of intermediaries in social communication contexts, including both the opportunities for professional communicators and the roles played by ‘promoters’ from within the community.

We are naturally cautious about PR models produced in Western academic institutions being imposed by practitioners eager to replicate mercantile notions of relationship management. Tufte (2005: 4; see also Servaes, 2008) recommends that scholars and practitioners instead place more significance on understanding the more globalised public sphere in which they work and, finally, become more culturally sensitive and culturally appropriate in their work, recognising and communicating within the variety of discourses of popular culture and producing culturally appropriate content within the formats, aesthetic and narrative languages. (Tufte, 2005: 4)

This might encourage universities to further develop courses that embrace global perspectives, not just Western ones. In particular, we support the study of communication tools and processes that emphasise community interaction that would seek to empower groups, encouraging them to find their own ‘voice’ in order to influence change through the sharing of information, experience and practice. Including such efforts in mainstream public relations curricula would go some way to broadening our understanding of public relations as a socio-cultural practice.

References and further reading


7

PRAGMATISM, SEMIOTICS AND SACRED TRUTH

Steve Mackey

Introduction

Thoughtful reading of the enduring theories of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) can result in a clearer understanding of the occasionally visceral hatred of public relations. Peirce explains that in order to survive and develop, humanity has evolved as a species which seeks logic cooperatively. For Peirce we model the world in our minds in a way which depends utterly on everyone striving for and candidly sharing the best account of truth which can be found. He says there is a huge emotional investment in the honesty of this project. The contention of this chapter is that it follows that primeval antagonism may be evoked if there is suspicion that, on the contrary, access to reality is being covertly manipulated for sectional interest. In this way Peirce’s views can be used to give an insight into the suspicion which seems to constantly surround the public relations industry. Peirce’s approach is known as ‘pragmatism’ although he later called it ‘pragmaticism’. It is about the practical outcomes of the ways we think and is associated with Peirce’s notion of ‘semiotics’ – the way we model the world in our minds using signs of the world. The intention below is to make pragmatism and semiotics accessible and relevant to an understanding of public relations. We will do this by initially anchoring pragmatism to the issue of climate change. The battle for public opinion over climate change involves a struggle to influence belief in the importance or otherwise of anthropomorphic causes of this phenomenon. In December 2009 belief about the degree of urgency of this crisis was affected by the failure of the United Nations Copenhagen Climate Change Conference and by what was called ‘Climategate’. Climategate was the name attached to publication just before the conference of e-mails appropriated from East Anglia University’s climate research unit. The e-mails revealed anomalies in the reporting of climate change data. They were used by climate change sceptics to cast doubt on the veracity of the science. Then in early 2010
the influential UN inter-governmental panel on climate change was forced to admit a previous report had been wrong when it claimed Himalayan glaciers would probably disappear by 2035. The scientific evidence for anthropogenic climate change continues to be overwhelming. But the belief of many people and consequently the views of many political parties and representative groups seemed to lose urgency following these events and revelations. A degree of doubt was fostered over the hitherto apparently best cooperative account of truth. This climate change example illustrates the similar consequences for the efforts of public relations practitioners if beliefs which they rely on are jeopardised.

**Truth is verified belief**

Peirce’s approach to truth and reality is based on two principles: one is that people are belief-philic, that is we constantly seek, hold and defend opinions which reassure us about who we are and how our world works. The other principle is that humanity is primordially predisposed to cooperatively seeking logical explanations. Opinions which remain communally verified in this process will be re-affirmed while those shown to be false will be denied (5.311). Peirce points out that it is a tautology to say that we think each of our beliefs to be true (5.375). His definition of truth and reality are put this way:

> The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.

(5.407)

For instance, for each of us either the belief that the Earth is warming, or the belief that this is a misnomer becomes ‘truth’ about a ‘reality’ if we feel happy that sufficient investigation has confirmed this. As Peirce puts it:

> For truth is neither more or less than the character of a proposition which consists in this: that the belief in the proposition would, with sufficient experience and reflection, lead us to such conduct as would tend to satisfy the desires we should then have. To say that truth means more than this is to say that it has no meaning at all.

(5.375n)

In this case: ‘the desires we should then have’ could be the desire every thinking person has that they want to be comfortable in their own mind that they understand and have a correct personal view on climate change. It is important to note Peirce’s evocation of the emotional and the social in his use of the terms ‘desire’ and ‘agreed to by all who investigate’. Elsewhere he uses the terms ‘Charity, Faith and Hope’ when discussing the social way that reason is attained (2.655). For Peirce, belief becomes truth if it is seen to be verified in a concrete outcome, or if sufficient people are convinced that it will be so verified. Our adhesion to these verified ‘true’ beliefs
reassures us that we understand what is happening in the world and consequently how we should act. This is what led to the title ‘pragmatism’. For Peirce, in choosing our beliefs we look to the practical outcomes of what our beliefs imply. We adjust our beliefs if a hitherto conceptualisation clashes with the actual, or now more obvious outcome which previous thinking predicted. Peirce did not originally emphasise the term pragmatism in his work which spans the 1860s to the 1910s. ‘Pragmatism’ only came into common usage after 1898 when it was promoted by Peirce’s colleague and benefactor William James as a label for James’s own brand of philosophy (Menand, 1997: xiii). James acknowledged Peirce as the originator of ‘Pragmatism’ but this led to some embarrassment for the recipient of James’s largesse who, as he wrote: ‘begs to announce the birth of the word “pragmaticism” which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers’ (5.414). James’s notion of ‘pragmatism’ was not what Peirce meant! James’s ‘Pragmatism’ implied that any body of ideas which has hermeneutic utility and thus which (metaphorically) has ‘cash value’ as a way of modelling the world, should be regarded as true (James 2006: 294). Peirce had a much more complex view about the relationship between theories and their practical outcomes. Peirce’s approach ‘involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits … ’, undertaking constant scientific scrutiny to arrive at the verification of belief [capitalisation in the original] (5.311). The scientific community’s exhaustive ongoing scrutiny of beliefs about climate change is an obvious example of obtaining truth and reality socially via communal process. The above implies that any activity which plays a social role in managing conceptualisations can be subjected to a Peircean critique of how beliefs are built, disrupted and ultimately acted upon. The way deeper understanding of public relations is enabled by this critique will be returned to after more explanation of Peirce’s system.

The elements of Peirce’s system

Today Peirce is usually thought of in relation to his semiotics – his science of signs. But when people think of semiotics they are generally considering a mixture of ideas about sign systems. This is a mixture dominated by twentieth-century linguistic and cultural theories stemming from Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). Developments of Saussure’s ‘semiology’ have led to intellectual dead ends. Peirce’s approach involving pragmatism is distinct from those ultimately disappointing structuralist and post-structuralist approaches (Deely 2001: 669–71). Peirce’s system is far more philosophically grounded than de Saussure’s and remains intellectually potent. Peirce builds on the shoulders of the scholastics who had considered signs for one and a half millennia. But for Peirce there is far more to say about what goes on in the mind than the way understandings are brought to life through signs. Here are the main components of Peirce’s system. We have already discussed some of them.

- People always seek comfort in certainty and abhor doubt.
- Truth is belief which in the long term cannot be disproved by a community of diligent scientific inquirers.
Beliefs are habits of mind which incline people to related types of action. Humans are predisposed to cooperate to seek truth. Thinking is the complex, managed relating together of representations. It involves mental as well as physical representations.

This last dot point begins to introduce Peirce’s semiotics which must be understood as based on a ‘metaphysics’ – a claim that things simply must be like that. For Peirce human existence must be understood as involving the categories of ‘firstness’; ‘secondness’; and ‘thirdness’. He gives the same credence and importance to these categories as Kant gave to his categorical pre-requisites of existence. Here is an explanatory summary of Peirce’s three categories.

- Firstness is the quality of things as they are before they are sensed or thought about.
- Secondness, as far as humans are concerned, is the interaction between aspects of things in the world (their signs) or aspects of concepts in the mind (internal signs) with the physiology and the mind which perceive them. In this sense signs or ‘representamens’ (2.242) are those aspects which communicate the existence and communicate some of the qualities of things – including mental ‘things’.
- Thirdness for humans is the organisational consequence in the mind of these just mentioned perceptions. It involves the ordering of secondness sign-events in terms of other secondness sign-events. Ambient sign-events and all sign-events which are already habitually predisposed by the memory and will come into contact from moment to moment and the relationships of these signs are frozen in time. As the mind ‘plays’ different instances of these ‘sign-arranged’ ‘freeze-frames’ forward, this ‘thirdness’ for humans becomes conscious and unconscious thought. This is like the way individual frames of a film, each one of which contains intricately related patterns of images frozen in time, gain virtual life as they are ‘played’ comparatively from instant to instant (5.289).

Thirdness should become more understandable after a reading of the section on semiotics later in this chapter.

**Longing for belief**

Peirce formed his views on belief influenced by Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain’s *The Emotions of the Will* (Bain, 1859). For Peirce belief is ‘a stadium of mental action, an effect upon our nature due to thought, which will influence future thinking’ (5.397). And, quoting Bain: ‘That upon which a man is prepared to act’ (5.12). For Bain, and subsequently for Peirce, the holding of belief produces a serene, satisfying and happy state of mind, while a mind in a condition of doubt is a mind in ‘discomfort’ or ‘aggravated wretchedness’ (Bain, 1859: 574–76):
the instinctive dislike of an undecided state of mind, exaggerated into a vague dread of doubt, makes men cling spasmodically to the views they already take ... a steady and immovable faith yields great peace of mind.

(5.377)

In this sense our beliefs involve for example our views about our local, national and global political, economic and cultural surroundings. These beliefs affect our purchasing decisions, our voting decisions, our career decisions. In fact our personal views about things – that is, our beliefs about our world – involve every single thing which public relations may at one time or another be called upon to attempt to influence. Belief about climate change is a case in point. But it is important to realise that environmental beliefs, like all other beliefs, are overwhelmingly likely to be socially produced and directed. This is because for Peirce people rarely form or hold their views individually (5.377). He calls the rare, individualist method of acquiring and holding belief the method of ‘tenacity’. He then discusses the three more viable non-individual methods of fixing belief. These are the methods of: ‘authority’; ‘a priori’; and ‘science’. Peirce says he admires people with the tenacity to form and stick to their own beliefs about important matters. But he suggests this is not practical in most facets of life. For Peirce the method of ‘authority’ ‘will always govern the mass of mankind’ (5.386). The method of authority is the method by which people’s beliefs are made to fall into line with the institutional doctrines of organised societies:

[N]o institution can undertake to regulate opinions upon every subject ... [but] ... those who wield the various forms of organised force in the state will never be convinced that dangerous reasoning ought not to be suppressed in some way.

(5.381–86)

In The fixation of belief Peirce tells us the method of authority has an alarming history under repressive and barbarous regimes. Writing in nineteenth-century America he says the contemporary ‘authority’ method eschewed the ‘grosser’ means of suppressing ‘liberty of speech’. But in the absence of physical terror ‘the respectable of society’ would instead bring ‘moral terrorism’ to bear on those who speak out of line (5.386). Peirce of course died well before the totalitarian periods in Europe. Peirce’s third method of creating belief is the ‘a priori’ method. This method resembles an artistic process. It results from ‘that which we find ourselves inclined to believe’ (5.382) rather than purely from observed facts. Beliefs which we glean through the a priori method emerge from common sense supplemented by reasoning. A priori ideas might later be found to be erroneous. Peirce gives the example of great philosophers who had to erect subsequently disproved metaphysics to fill in the inexplicable – such as the notion of the celestial spheres. The methods of tenacity, authority and a priori all have their strong points; however for Peirce: ‘The method of scientific investigation ... is the only one of the four methods which presents any distinction of a right and wrong way’ (5.385). He gives Roger Bacon, Francis Bacon, Copernicus, Tycho
Brahe, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Lavoisier, Darwin and others as exemplars of the scientific method:

"Every work of science great enough to be well remembered for a few generations affords some exemplification of the defective state of the art of reasoning at the time when it was written and each chief step in science has been a lesson in logic.

(5.362–63)

Peirce’s preference is for an ideal science where people always legitimately strive to follow the best logic towards the most reliable truth. But science evolves: ‘Who can be sure of what we shall not know in a hundred years?’ (5.410). What we seem to know today may be superseded tomorrow. Added to this science costs money and time. It follows that sometimes the only available route to correct understanding may be an educated guess. Consequently, what Peirce calls variously ‘hypothesis’, ‘abduction’ and ‘retroduction’ – making informed guesses – may be the only practical way of initiating inductive reasoning to try to find the real. But irrespective of method Peirce’s over-arching concern about belief was an ethical one. Through whatever method, people should always strive for the truth, even if the truth makes us uncomfortable:

But above all let it be considered that what is more wholesome than any particular belief is integrity of belief … to avoid looking into the support of any belief from a fear that it may turn out rotten is quite as immoral as it is disadvantageous.

(5.387)

Peirce’s ‘method of tenacity’ and ‘method of authority’ might be illustrated by juxtaposing these terms in the following way.

An isolated public relations practitioner might seek the support and ‘authority’ of their professional association in order to maintain morale for a ‘tenacious’ belief, perhaps over climate change, during an ethical dispute with an employer or with colleagues who are attempting to impose the ‘authority’ of dominant corporate beliefs and consequent logic. A striking illustration of Peirce’s ‘method of authority’ might be given as practitioner roles when they are communication strategists and technologists for powerful institutions. In this role public relations people may be involved with setting, maintaining or opposing beliefs which ‘will always govern the mass of mankind’. At the societal level this would mean that spokespersons for governments and corporations may very well align themselves with ‘the respectable of society’ and perhaps be implicated in a process of ‘moral terrorism’ in order to maintain or to try to adjust political, economic and social mores. Some might say it is all to the good if anthropomorphic climate change sceptics are ‘morally terrorised’ in this manner. However, an ethical public relations would need to default climate change-related campaigns towards scientific argument in the first instance.
The morally risky – because of belief-philia – *a priori* method of affecting belief might nonetheless also be appropriate. An *a priori* approach might involve promoting the ‘common sense’ that the overwhelming majority of scientists confirm global warming.

If belief is indeed ‘an effect upon our nature due to thought, which will influence future thinking’, and if this future thinking will determine how we will act, then clearly anything which public relations does to meet longing for belief in the field of climate change is important. It is important whether the belief is assisted by backing an individual’s tenacity; by projecting justifiable authority; by arguing from *a priori* notions; or by promoting the scientific argument.

**Evolution and ‘logical Socialism’**

Peirce thought humanity may be evolving into a truth seeking species: ‘Logicality … is the most useful quality an animal can possess … And might therefore result from natural selection’ (5.366–67). This ‘quality’ had evolved so far in people that it has become a sort of sixth sense:

> [M]an has a certain Insight … strong enough not to be overwhelmingly more oftener wrong than right … as if we were in possession of facts that are entirely beyond the reach of our senses …

(5.173)

Humans deploy this ‘animal’ logic most effectively in a social manner:

> Logic is rooted in the social principle. To be logical men should not be selfish … this requires a conceived identification of one’s own interests with those of an unlimited community.

(2.652–55)

The last quote should not be confused with the notion of a passive, social construction of reality in people’s minds. On the contrary, Peirce is here describing and encouraging facilitation and enhancement of the already evolved activity of seeking truth by the use of cooperative study and debate. Well-functioning communities act collegially to try out, test and develop their ideas with intellectual integrity. This means everyone is ‘on their honour’ to cooperate and to agree that: ‘to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth’ (5.543). Peirce is putting us all on our mettle to always seek and never to try to distort what we believe is the truth when we are engaged in the hugely important activity of creating the world through discourse. Public relations practitioners are among those who shoulder this ‘responsibility for truth’ doubly. This is because they are actually *employed* to create and distribute discourse in order to influence the workings of others’ minds. The ethical responsibility of public relations people to never inappropriately leverage humanity’s belief-philia in this work cannot be overstated.
Apel labels the *social* requirement for the attainment of truth: ‘logical Socialism’ and suggests:

Peirce had already implicitly founded in his logical Socialism, that the world cannot be known or explained merely by its previously fixed, lawful structure, but must rather continue to be developed as a historical, social world of institutions and habits for which we must assume responsibility … As members of the community of interpreters [of truth, reality and what the world is] human beings must remain for mankind the subjects engaged in science and none the less be capable of being made the topic of rational knowledge and praxis.

*(Apel, 1981: 193)*

This summary and appeal comes near the end of Apel’s explanation and critique of Peirce’s pragmatism. It is meant to rouse and challenge readers to enlist Peirce’s insights so as to understand and be reflective on the way perceptions of reality are constantly maintained ideologically. For Apel Peirce shows how the generation of social imagery and the management of social belief are incessantly, simultaneously building, maintaining and modifying what we think of as the world and what we think of as ourselves and our relationship to the world. This is an anti-objectivist view. The world and ourselves do not just simply exist as it and we ‘are’. Instead, it and we – particularly the political, economic and social aspects of the world and ourselves – are constant works in progress. It and we are ongoing creations of praxis of thought linked to activity. An important aspect of praxis is the activity of symbolising thought – that is, of creating discourse. Discursive praxis is clearly relevant to what we might call the ‘truthsmithing industries’ – the industries which are fully aware that ‘belief is a rule for action … [and] … The final upshot of thinking is the exercise of volition’ (5.397). In addition to a call for general morality, Apel is also issuing a call for industries such as public relations to be ‘capable of being made the topic of rational knowledge and praxis’ – in other words, open to reflection on, and adjustment about, just what it is they are doing to society. He is advocating the use of Peirce for the critical scholarship of communication industries in the manner which this chapter attempts.

**Semiotics**

Peirce’s semiotics is an approach with a long pedigree. Scholastics had already been building semiotics for a millennia and a half since ‘Church Father’ St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) wrote:

Conventional signs on the other hand, are those which living beings mutually exchange for the purpose of showing as well as they can, the feelings of their minds, or their perceptions, or their thoughts.

*(Augustine 1952: Bk 2, Ch 1–2)*
Scholastic semiotics culminates in the highly developed system of Descartes’ contemporary John or Jean Poinsot (1589–1644). Poinsot’s contribution to semiotics is generally overlooked today but it is important for two main reasons. One is that he seems to have hit on exactly the same notions of firstness, secondness and thirdness as Peirce. The other reason is that, according to Deely (1992), Peirce never read Poinsot. The importance here is that firstness, secondness and thirdness would therefore seem to be a set of intellectual fundamentals in the semiotic approach. In other words semiotics cannot be understood divorced from these terms. For this reason it is useful to compare Poinsot’s ‘First’; ‘Second’; and ‘Third’ ‘Operation of the Intellect’ – the titles of his three ‘Books’ in *Outlines of Formal Logic* (Poinsot, 1955) – to Peirce’s ‘categories’ of firstness, secondness and thirdness. For Poinsot ‘first operation’ logic involves the intellect with ‘ultimate elements’ analogous to ‘natural generation prime matter’ (Poinsot, 1955: 29). We might take the meaning here as: things as they are before they are sensed or thought about. In ‘second operation’: ‘A sentence manifests something unknown’ (ibid.: 44) – that is, something in the world is conceptualised, or objectified through representation. ‘The third operation of the intellect is carried on by discourse, which necessarily requires inference and consequence by which one thing is deduced from another’ (ibid.: 103). This third ‘operation’ equates to the consequences when the mind works on objectified perceptions – that is, when thinking takes place. Here are Peirce’s three ‘categories’ in comparison to Poinsot’s three ‘operations’.

The first is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything or lying behind anything. The second is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second. The third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation to each other.

(1.356)

What both Poinsot’s and Peirce’s ‘trichotomies’ (1.355) mean is this: thinking is a process involving the arrangement or relating of mind perceptions (see above). The presumption of both Peirce’s and Poinsot’s semiotics is that there are real things in the world, as well as real thoughts in the mind which are signified by the sensual and/or mental impacts which they give rise to. These impacts are received by sensate beings as representations of some sort. In humans these representations come into contact with the ‘will’ and the memory and are ‘classified’ as new representations. This is an intelligence-creating process which is invoked as each representation which is produced by each physical and mental impact – each physiological and mental stimulus – is scrutinised and classified. The ‘classification’ is governed by how the intellect is currently disposed in terms of other stimuli, and by the memories and internal habits it already has for classifying mental stimuli. As a representation becomes ‘classified’ – that is fitted in among the myriad other classified representations in the mind – it mutates into a now ‘known’ form of representation whose ‘impact’ gives rise to further classifications – that is, a chain of thoughts is triggered off. Peirce summarises this three-aspect process of ‘thinking’ as follows:
A *Representamen* is the First Correlate of a triadic relation, the Second Correlate being termed its *Object*, and the possible Third Correlate being termed its *Interpretant*, by which triadic relation the possible Interpretant is determined to be the First Correlate of the same triadic relation to the same Object, and for some possible Interpretant. A sign is a representamen of which some Interpretant is a cognition of a mind.

(2.242)

Think in terms of the words and imagery such as television imagery – the *representamens* – which have ‘objectified’ climate change for you. Firstness corresponds to whatever it is that ‘climate change’ consists of before we try to describe and think about it. Secondness corresponds to the impact on our minds of the vast range of *representamens* – that is, signs such as those devised by deliberate public relations as well as other public relations–like practices, which are being generated on this subject: for instance scientific data, rational discourse and elaborate propaganda. Thirdness corresponds to what happens as *representamens* on this subject become fitted in our minds among existing sign schema. These are sign schema which at every instant are held in place sometimes elastically, sometimes rigidly, by memories, learning and preferences of our will. That is, at every moment new *representamens* are located within and help to re-formulate new ‘frames’ of sign schema in terms of pre-existing habitual as well as ‘ambient’ – that is, other ‘at that moment impacting’ influences on thought. As time plays forward, each of these instantaneous or a-temporal ‘mental-schema fixations’, these ‘signage dispositions’, are brought into play as aspects of ongoing internal and communal discourse. In other words, we ‘think’ this about climate change or that about climate change. Clearly these are complex concepts. The key point to grasp is that the public relations industry and other public relations–like practices are often the key producers and distributors of what Peirce would refer to as *representamens* – that is, the signs which can be argued to facilitate certain ways of thinking.

What Peirce and Poinsot’s semiotics implies is this: we can approach completely true knowledge of the world i.e. we can get near to the absolute reality of things like climate change, if our minds are sufficiently attuned to ‘classifying’ or ‘reading’ the indications – the representations of things – in ways which can eventually be corroborated. For Peirce the best corroboration comes by thorough science deployed in the logical-social manner previously explained. This implication corresponds with Pierce’s original ‘Pragmatic Maxim’ that:

> [i]t appears then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.

(5.402)

In other words, we understand climate change to a level of correctness which is determined by the quality of the semiotic process. This quality depends on the level
of integrity of representation and the adequacy of interpretation. So for public relations, how well a notion about climate change is represented and how skilfully the practitioner goes about fitting the representation in among the most truthful representation in the minds of the target public – that is, fitting to the adequacies and inadequacies of the ‘culture’ of the target public – will determine the quality, that is the truthfulness of the knowledge which results. The ‘fitting’ which is involved in these practices determines how close people come into contact with reality.

**Conclusion: public relations and the sacred truth**

This chapter implies that what people can know of reality and what aspects of reality are obscured from them depends on the qualities, including the ethics, of the semiotic processes employed by, for example, public relations, lobbying, advertising, news and current affairs media, education and the creative arts. These institutions and processes are among the most important large-scale creators and managers of what can be analysed as the semiotic facilitation or obfuscation of reality. The importance of these institutions can be illustrated by an allusion to the history of organised religion. For long periods of history the management of access to reality by the ‘method of authority’ was an overtly sacred practice. More than a few ‘tenacious’ heretics have been excommunicated or even crucified or burned at the stake for trying to enable semiotic access to reality in non-conforming ways. In this manner an analogy can be drawn that access to reality is and will always remain ‘hallowed ground’. As a consequence publishers, journalists, politicians, advertisers, corporate leaders, in fact rhetoricians of every stripe risk accusations akin to having committed sacrilege when they are held to have trespassed on such ground. But an argument can be made that none of these occupations risk the accusation more than does the occupation of public relations practitioner.

Peirce and Bain say human minds crave belief. We grab onto systems of ideas which seem to fulfil our desperate human survival instinct to make logical sense of our world. This makes us belief-philic, malleable metal. Our ideas can potentially be smithied into shape by those who control information. Our thinking can be annealed and then melted and smithied again. Sometimes we ‘tenaciously’ control the forge ourselves. Usually the hammering is done by others via the ‘method of authority’. This process goes on semiotically as signs of what appear to be the real are produced, offered, related and re-related in: ‘the vast complexus, which we may call the instinctive mind … a chemical genus of extreme complexity’ (5.212); (6.101). This is a mind which in each of us is served by approximately 10 to the power 11 neurons which have an estimated ten to the power fourteen possible connections (New Scientist, 2005). The sign-system storage, retrieval and computing power implied in these figures is already unimaginably enormous. But now further multiply by the millions of individuals and institutions in a position to influence social thinking, and the multi-million-fold complexity of message pathways which they have access to. This impossible calculation gives us some insight into the scale of human semiotic activity. Somewhere in these universe-sized matrices human beliefs are created and
lodged and the truths which lie among them like golden nuggets are sometimes
diligently striven for, sometimes deliberately obscured, sometimes stumbled upon,
sometimes passed unnoticed as we ceaselessly wander among endless forests of dis-
course. This is the conceptualisation which Peirce’s pragmatism and semiotics offers
the fields of communication studies and the creative arts generally. But perhaps the
most important implication of Peirce’s critique for public relations is the ethical one.
As we have seen, according to Apel’s summary of Peirce the ever present struggle for
making sense of our lives involves ‘logical Socialism’. Logical Socialism implies a
setting aside of sectional interests. Truthful cooperation is absolutely vital to survival
to the extent that it requires the hallowing of communal efforts to constantly model
and debate ideas adequate to the real as history is continually created and re-created.
This is where public relations can sometimes be seen as shockingly unethical in a way
which previous centuries might have termed ‘sacrilegious’. The ever present hostility
to public relations and other rhetorical processes comes about because of a primeval
social and even animal hatred of attempts to influence beliefs which are not a genuine
part of this cooperative – to the extent of being sacred – pursuit of truth. If ‘truth gen-
eration’ – particularly disguised or covert ‘truth generation’ is revealed, or even only
suspected as being for sectional interests rather than for the communal project, then
this implies sacrilege at the semiotic level. The public relations officer can cope with
relatively mild objections created by the dissonance effects of changing ideas. But it is
harder to deal with the primeval hatred invoked by suspicion that he or she is rob-
ing people of their access to reality. This is the charge against rhetorical practices
which has hung in the air since at least the times of the pre-Socratic sophists. It is a
charge which is a healthy critique of any public relations practice which risks
compromising ethics.

Note
1 Peirce did not publish a finished book. The most widely used source of his work is the
The convention for referring to this work is, for instance, (6.522–28) where 6 is the
volume and 522–28 refers to paragraphs 522 to 528.

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Further reading


Augustine (1952) *The Confessions; The City of God; On Christian Doctrine*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica. Look at the beginning of book II of *On Christian Doctrine* to see that semiotics is not as recent a development at many seem to think. Augustine also writes about figurative language in book III.


Gallie, W. B. (1975) *Peirce and Pragmatism*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press. This is an examination of Peirce’s pragmatism expressed much more simply than Apel’s.

S. Haack & R. Lane (Eds) *Pragmatism, Old and New: Selected Writings*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. This is a good reader compilation and has a good introductory commentary on Peirce, James and other leading pragmatists and neo-pragmatists.

Menand, L. (1997) *Pragmatism: A Reader*. New York: Vintage Books. This is also a good reader compilation and also has a good introductory commentary on Peirce, James and other leading pragmatists and neo pragmatists. It would be advisable to read both Menand’s and Haack’s introductions as they appear to have diverging views, and of course some different selections.

This chapter seeks to identify and understand the various ways public relations is working through the internet, particularly 'social media', exploring a range of associated social and cultural developments. Relevant to this discussion are two divergent views about its character. The first is a utopian ideal that came to prominence in Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* (1995). It promoted a key assumption about the internet’s open accessibility and potential to create a digital democracy where new forms of ‘community’ could flourish. The second view is somewhat bleaker and undermines this. Castells (2001) argued that even in early and emerging internet cultures, it is likely that entrenched relations of power were firmly in place, providing important techno-economic and social advantages to big business and their instruments. Contextualised by this dichotomy, I explore online cultures and theorise how they have provided oxygen to the rather tarnished occupation of public relations. In the late twentieth century, the public relations industry was derided for its ruthless promotion of organisational self-interest, resulting in ‘spin’ or the degradation of ‘truth’ in public debates, (L’Etang, 2008; Breit, 2007). Moreover it was lampooned when rafts of clever but unethical practices linked to big business were exposed, examples are greenwashing (the pretence of being environmentally responsible) and astroturfing (phoney front groups) (Nelson, 1989; Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Burton, 2007). Therefore public relations’ expansion and hybridisation through social media is of interest, not only to those within the industry concerned with its ethics, but more broadly in society, as these developments could have consequences for the creation of conditions where people can think for themselves. Questions I explore are the effects of this increased activity – and its characteristics – and if they pose new threats for the agency and the political development of citizens, as well as challenges for ethical practice within the occupation of public relations.

Technologically transformative, seductively narcissistic and detraditionalised, the internet in its many forms has colonised social and economic life in the twenty-first century.
It has brought into being a social space in which people can express themselves, search for information, buy goods and services, and importantly have inter-relations. The advantage of flexible and adaptable communication in a networked world is no more evident than in the second wave of internet usage ‘Web 2.0’ which gained prominence in 2004. According to Brown (2009: 1) this development enabled the easy addition of ‘words, pictures, sounds and video’ into web sites. These ‘DIY’ affordances have given rise to the burgeoning use of social media (or networking) sites as a form of direct publishing. Examples are blogs or online journals set up by individuals and accessed by other users who comment on the e-diary entries; and wikis, where users collaboratively ‘open edit’ material by consensus. They now provide for new forms of social relations, but significantly mark a shift in power from technocrats to ordinary users (Brown, 2009: 2). In tandem with these developments, enterprises, such as Second Life, Twitter and Facebook, have proliferated. Now the term ‘social media’ is used interchangeably with ‘Web 2.0’ (Safko & Brake, 2009: ix).

On first appearance the rise of social media – free thinking, inventive and bold – may seem like a pessimistic development for an occupation like public relations. Indeed PR began as a way for an organisation to generate positive publicity that might offset public pressures to regulate big business’ (McElreath, 1997: 6). Typically, in the twentieth century, much of its activity was identified with media that could reach mass audiences such as newspapers, radio and television; and consequently, power was neatly concentrated in the hands of media gatekeepers, such as editors, who could be cultivated and influenced (Ryan, 1991). Therefore developments that facilitate ‘publics’ producing and distributing content to mass audiences, in a cost effective way, might seem highly unfavourable for an occupation focused on controlling and managing their behaviour and attitudes. Hence for PR theorist Rob Brown, the shift in power relations could be regarded as alarming:

They are taking matters into their own hands through their blogs and online networks and user-generated content. They are organizing political campaigns and building coalitions based around common interests. They are spreading news and information to one another on a scale never before thought possible. They are the masters now.

(Brown, 2009: 20)

Today, the internet’s decentralised organisational structure and affordances have changed the means and conventions by which people and organisations engage. Reaching a mass audience is no longer the sole domain of a few large organisations. Blogs, for example, give immediate, grassroots feedback on corporations. This information flow can build groups from previously unconnected backgrounds, expand the users’ personal networks, encourage engagement and contribute to the coordination of social action. This happened in 2005 when a dissatisfied Dell computer customer posted a blog about his experiences with the giant corporate, causing a snowball effect that vexed the company for years (Brown, 2009: 17). Therefore, for business, social media presents issues such as: lack of message control as ‘postings are regarded as
sacrosanct’ (Brown, 2009: 14); the rapid spread of damaging information; as well as a quagmire of legal problems in the protection of intellectual property, such as copyright, brand names and logos (Newson et al., 2009: 142–47).

Despite this, public relations is thriving, and in particular, Web 2.0 or social media provide untrammeled territory. According to Brown one reason is that ‘we are starting to see a whole host of new routes and opportunities through which we can communicate with our audience’ (2009: 21). Similarly, for technology journalist Rupert White (in Newson et al., 2009: xii), ‘Any company that can work out how to make money from creating the “room” in which a community can interact and play most likely doesn’t need to create very much content for that community. Build it, and they will come.’ Hence for business, this vast, playful, new web-using public can become their greatest asset ‘and all for no salary’ (White in Newson et al., 2009: xii). These views suggest that rather than a real shift in power that empowers publics, for business, it is more the case that the ‘rules of engagement’ have changed.

Building on this ambiguity, my overall argument is that social media provides public relations as organisational ‘self-interest’ more opportunity to control and influence its web-users. In unpacking my argument, I apply a broad-based sociological and cultural approach to avoid a pre-occupation with the surface effects and hype surrounding the new technology. A myriad of descriptive works exist that serve this function adequately. Rather I seek to shed light on the underlying social structures and cultural transformations taking place around these new discursive social relations. Hence, I focus on the emerging internet cultures and communicative strategies used by business. In particular, my analysis centres on culture, language and meaning-making and how this positions ‘publics’ in relation to conflict and the use of persuasive techniques. ‘Publics’ are defined as a group of people that organisations wish to communicate with, and to persuade, in relation to a politically contentious issue (Heath, 2001: 47), while ‘culture’ is defined as ‘the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience’ and the relationship between this, to the creation of social identity (Fiske, 1989: 1). Key concepts that I draw on to argue this case are Jurgen Habermas’ ideas about communicative action; Ulrich Beck’s conceptions of individualisation; and Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony.

**A web of little traditions and relics**

Public relations can be defined as the instrument of specialised commercial interests used in the creation of self-serving public consent (Habermas, 1995). Hence some unease about the PR industry is partly because of its potential to exploit news and media outlets ‘to the point of setting agendas and becoming primary definers themselves’ (Breit, 2007: 10). In part, it is because these practices have led to controversial issues around social control and resistance. Regarding the phenomenon of public relations as insidious, Habermas (1995: 193–235) maintained that this was because the public is unaware of its presence within the ‘public sphere’. In its purest form the public sphere is a social space – such as a newspaper discussion or a public...
forum – separate from the state and business, and where citizens, in a free and open way, engage in dialogue and debate focused around issues for the common good (Habermas, 1995: 27). He pointed out that in public relations, it is therefore vital that an advertisement is not recognisable as the presentation of self-interest, but rather it creates the illusion of public interest mimicking the original intention of the public sphere (Habermas, 1995: 194). Therefore for public relations to be successful, consumers must be given a false consciousness and believe that they are actually making a decision based on their own judgement about what is good for themselves. Building on these themes, I speculate that public relations and its problems for society have been hard for publics to analyse precisely because it is an unusual form of ‘system rationality’ or instrumental reason that publicly represents itself as communicative action – the form of rationality that links to the lifeworld and its notions of interpretative consensus and mutual agreement (Habermas, 1989: 333). To engineer consent in a climate of consensus (Habermas, 1995: 194) public relations is thus saturated with symbols and images of communicative action rationality and of the lifeworld. Familiar examples are highly produced brochures where images and text draw on reassuring ideas, such as family, entertaining and good times, and are used to position publics positively in relation to a ‘key message’ that privileges a commercial entity or discourse.

Given these unusual business characteristics, how does social media (or networking) provide new opportunities for public relations’ expansion? According to Newson et al. (2009: 59): ‘As the terms suggests, social networking sites allow people to network online in a primarily non-business way. The most popular sites deliberately blur the boundaries between different types of social media in the battle for popularity.’ Thus the instrument of public relations – distorting the system/lifeworld and in doing so contradicting ideas about what and how business should look and behave – has been given full expression on the internet. Examples are social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter – appearing friendly, benign and communal spaces to some, but cold-blooded commerce to others. As a result, public relations managing communication through social media is even more difficult for publics to identify as persuasion, and to resist, than mainstream forms. Therefore it is the very opacity of public relations practices which is working within and through the internet, and the bewildering contradictions between what it ‘ought to be’ and ‘what it is’, illustrated by the views of Rheingold (1995) and Castells (2001), as well as the emergence of new methods of practice, which give rise to concerns about what this means for our society and cultures.

In the new millennium, the various iterations of the internet – reinterpreted, relaxed and fused invisibly with the fictions of lifeworld and commercial discourses – have provided fertile ground for public relations. This optimism in public relations ranks is in marked contrast to the last century when politically offensive practices and tactics – such as greenwashing and astroturfing – were uncovered and publicly reviled. Not surprisingly a tremor of excitement is palpable in public relations circles. In pitching its Certificate in Social Media, the Public Relations Institute of Ireland (PRII) writes: ‘Whether you are a fully-fledged convert or remain sceptical of their long-term
influence, the evidence and experience of countless organisations, large and small, across the globe suggests that social media will undoubtedly take their rightful place in the communication arsenal (circa 2010). However making sense of public relations, its relationship to ‘publics’ and persuasion in social media – both for industry associations such as the PRII and more broadly in society – needs to be understood in relation to the changes to, and disappearance of, other forms of culture, in particular, the reconstruction of notions such as ‘place’, ‘community’ and ‘friend’. Central to these transformations is the shifting concept of the individual in large-scale late-modern Western society.

Sociologist Ulrich Beck argues that in early modernity ‘individualism’ was firmly embedded and institutionalised in class structures, gender and family roles that were culturally policed and thus reproduced (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 64). It took courage and audacity for individuals to flaunt these rigid and conventional ways of living and loving. However in late modernity Beck claims individualisation is ‘radicalised’. By this he means it is embedded as a social concept, resulting in cultures that propel people to pursue their self-interest in multidirectional ways (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 66). Hence ‘difference’ and ‘choice’ are promoted, not because there is more creativity and free-thinking in our society, but ‘because the norm is that one must individualize’ (Beck & Willms, 2004: 67). So within this contradictory ‘unity of difference’ not everyone will actually become politicised and nonconformist, although the multiplicity of choices may well give the illusion that that is the case. Beck argues that this is a common misunderstanding of the concept and warns of a disturbing and somewhat ironic side-effect: ‘The opposite might be just as probable. We might end up observing the retreat of the self into blind obedience. The desire for relief from the pressure to individuate can lead to all kinds of fundamentalism’ (in Beck & Willms, 2004: 67).

Rapid techno-economic developments, such as the rise of mobile technology and digital networks, work in tandem with this radicalised individualisation and lead to a process of disembedding the known and understood ways of behaving in the social environment. Over time new ways of behaving are re-embedded (Beck in Beck et al., 2000: 13). However this upheaval creates social disintegration where norms of behaviour are constantly questioned and challenged, while another effect is that the individual is released from the dominating and restrictive cultural patterns of the past with ‘the compulsion to find and invent new certainties’ (in Beck et al., 2000: 14; see also Mackey in this volume). Empowered by these social conditions, the individual’s ‘compulsion’ is also given impetus because the future seems uncertain and dangerous. Beck refers to this as a ‘risk society’ – one where thinking and action are re-defined, in relation to the hazards and threats produced by industrialisation processes, for example global warming or toxic contaminations that may have deleterious intergenerational effects (Beck, 1992: 19).

While not referring specifically to the internet, Beck argues that one of the cultural patterns dissolving and changing is the idea of a local community linked to place. Indeed he argues these notions are being ‘reshaped’ by altered meanings until they become ‘either relics or habits’ (in Beck et al., 2000: 101). For social media it is the
relics of ‘community’ and the reshaping of meanings around ‘place’ and ‘friends’, together with a social concept of individualisation, that has created significant opportunities for public relations as system rationality to create a unique cultural environment conducive to reacculturation processes and culture-making. However, a potential consequence to be considered is whether these discursive forums create conditions which give rise to ‘blind obedience and fundamentalism’ (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 67). For example, do they provide a new way for powerful organisations, like corporations, to gain and exercise power, perhaps by creating uncertainty in relation to a particular social group or cultivating mood of consent for a particular policy direction? My analysis seeks to shed light on these ‘collaboration’ techniques by business and identify what new meanings constitute ‘community’, in order to understand its relationship with persuasion.

Central to this, is whether virtual communities, so common in commercial social media, construct a vehicle for persuasion and hegemony – a key objective of public relations and a means by which it can attain ‘obedience’. Hegemony refers to ‘the combination of force and consent’ whereby the control appears to be ‘based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion – newspapers and association – which, therefore, in certain situations, are artificially multiplied’ (Gramsci in Storey, 2006: 85). This chapter posits two ways social media, through virtual worlds, can hegemonically ‘force’ consent – first, by the powerful social current of individualisation which propels them to engage with notions of ‘choice’ (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 67); and second, by an economic imperative to interact and contribute to the internet’s increasing dominance, due to its self-reinforcing characteristics (Castells, 2001: 265–66).

A good example of how ‘consent’ is achieved in social media is through terms ‘community’ and ‘residents’ which describe its users ‘reshaped’ by these new and ‘distant’ influences (Beck in Beck et al., 2000: 101). These words connote positive social relations organised around group-living and local politics, and are preferred over the more accurate descriptor: ‘consumers’, which has negative connotations linked to the absence of ‘human agency’ (Du Gay, 1996: 81). This is especially evident in the main grid of Second Life – an internet-based business platform that simulates ‘reality’ in an interactive virtual world. Particular to this social media product is the user’s ability to extend their identity through an animated customised human-like representation called an ‘avatar’. According to their website avatars or ‘residents’ can shop, trade, gamble, play games with money from the Linden Dollar Exchange ‘and from other third party websites’. In Second Life the hegemonic use of ideologically invested discourse serves to restructure traditional power relations between its producers and consumers. Consumers are transformed into ‘residents’ of a ‘community’, while the producers, by the harmonising of language, are an unseen authority. This contributes to a climate of consensus or harmony which lends the producers even greater control over audiences and therefore greater control over the social space. The owner of Second Life, Linden Research Inc., in understanding the effects of these conditions, represents it as a form of bottom-up decentralised digital democracy; its logo stating that it is ‘imagined, created and owned by its residents’.
Therefore in presenting itself as grassroots, deinstitutionalised and as a quasi-alternative state that promotes greater individual freedom, Second Life hegemonically controls and diverts the user’s attention from the reality of making a profit’ to an illusion of empowerment through ‘choice’ funnelled through harmonising relics. And business clearly recognises that ‘community’ on Second Life is a relationship-building feature of public relations rather than a collection of people that have ‘a shared set of social bonds or a social web … (and) that carry a set of shared moral and social values’ (Etzioni, 1995: 17). According to Field Fisher Waterhouse (in Newson et al., 2009: 74):

Virtual worlds offer a compelling environment for communication and collaboration, as well as an important distribution channel. By establishing a Second Life presence, we’re able to interact in new and engaging ways with our clients and the wider community. Businesses are moving increasingly rapidly into Second Life and other 3D internet environments and their advisers should be there with them. (Field Fisher Waterhouse, in Newson et al., 2009: 74)

Simultaneously an intimate, public and commercial sphere, Facebook is another interesting example of social media that attempts to replicate the relic of community. Its website claims: ‘Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected. Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet’. According to Newson et al. (2009: 60) it is one of the most popular social media sites and perhaps this is because ‘the emphasis is on users’ identities being authentic’. However, if viewed in relation to radicalised individualisation, then ‘authenticity’ becomes nothing more than a clever persuasive strategy in the PR ‘arsenal’. This is evident by the raft of new ways that business instruments, such as public relations, can position their organisations on social media. For example on Facebook they can ‘Build a Presence’ by cultivating ‘fans’. Facebook advises: ‘Want more fans? Encourage your fans to create a FAN BADGE showing their support for you!’ The obvious intent of this strategy is to impose loyalty and brand recognition in customers, but leveraging off authenticity – as a persuasive strategy – adds a layer of complexity that binds individuals even more securely to the illusion of personal choice and freedom of expression on social media.

However for business, the setting of a culturally dominating objective and achieving it are two different things. Are not ‘publics’ that use Second Life and Facebook more savvy, educated and resistant to persuasive and hegemonic techniques than previous generations? Arguably, the acculturation process in social media is subtle and gradual. That said, there are worrying signs that strategies such as developing a fan-base successfully obscure contradictions which should be apparent to critical publics. An example is the tobacco industry, which according to The Age (24 April 2010) is using Facebook to ‘subvert bans and international conventions against cigarette advertising’. One page for Lucky Strike cigarettes has ‘tens of thousands of
members, (and) had images of old and new tobacco ads and various Lucky Strike tobacco products and merchandise. An effect of this activity is that the tobacco industry positions publics towards a politically benign relationship with its product. Therefore when ‘fans’ of Lucky Strike engage with a seemingly trivial discussion responding to questions such as ‘Well, the weekend is almost here, and we HAVE to know … any bowling plans?’, they may be unaware that at the same time they are harmonising a major social contradiction: the promotion of tobacco products, with their widely reviled and unhealthy effects.

Furthermore a recent study into Facebook shows how it is centrally organised around an identity of narcissism and self promotion. Buffardi & Campbell argue (2008: 1304); ‘Narcissism refers to a personality trait reflecting a grandiose and inflated self-concept. Specifically, narcissism is associated with positive and inflated self-views of agentic traits like intelligence, power and physical attractiveness … as well as a pervasive sense of uniqueness … and entitlement.’ They argue online communities such as Facebook which has millions of users worldwide ‘may be an especially fertile ground for narcissists’ and for behaviour that promotes shallow and superficial relationships and control over self-presentation (2008: 1304). Significantly their study’s findings show how these shallow characteristics are melded into users’ every day existence. ‘The results demonstrate that narcissists act, portray themselves, and are perceived on social networking sites in a manner similar to how they behave in real, offline life’ (2008: 1312).

Buffardi & Campbell do not make any correlations between narcissistic publics and resilience in detecting and understanding persuasive techniques. However their study found that ‘participating in social networking online … allows for controlled self-presentation, satiates the craving for attention, and promotes shallow relationships’ (2008: 1311). Therefore this chapter argues that it is within these changed conditions where practices such as ‘manipulating Web site usage and assessing short- and long-term personality change’ are normalised to a greater extent so that lower thresholds to persuasion are created (Buffardi & Campbell 2008: 1311). Thus in a similar way to Second Life, Facebook is an example of a ‘thin’ internet community wrapped up in veneer of community, where blinkered cultures of self-gratification are normalised and identity is shaped.

Moreover, publics using these social media sites are also positioned towards system rationality by the dominant but underlying numeric cultures. One example in Facebook is the superficial renderings of the idea of ‘friendship’ where pride is taken in having ‘hundreds or even thousands of “friends”‘ (Buffardi & Campbell 2008: 1304). Indeed, for US journalist Anard Giridharadas, this idea of quantifying values on social media for example how many visitations, by whom and when, through metrics or numeric cultures, demonstrates ‘assumptions and leaps of faith built into numbers’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 11 March 2010). Thus for publics ‘faith in numbers’ demonstrates, not only the embedded system rationality, but another part of a subtle acculturation process that hegemonically links to a belief in economic rationalism and once again positions publics uncritically towards persuasion.
Similarly, the re-constructed idea of ‘friendship’ is more about preparing the
ground to hegemonically exploit a sense of loyalty associated with the concept. As
discussed, implicitly numeric cultures intersect with business strategies to the extent
some claim that social media sites such as Facebook represent a ‘new way of thinking’
‘in which you view your customers as co-producers of your products and services’
(Safko & Brake, 2009: xi). In this light, instead of ‘digital democracy’, social media
sites like Second Life and Facebook can be viewed more cynically as a privatised
forum of political and social control that works through hegemony. Thus the disint-
tegration of social norms develops opportunities to construct and hybridise new
identities, new conceptions of place, community and friendship performed through
the spectacle of social media; creating warm tropical conditions for public relations
practitioners – and others – observing the private worlds of others.

Publics, persuasion and politics

The achievement of hegemonic control depends on the support of a majority view
achieved through an ‘organ of public opinion’ which in turn works within the public
sphere. Gramsci (in Storey, 2006: 85) identified this with newspapers but today powerful
internet search engines, user-generated blogging, micro-blogging, vodcasting, podcasting,
together with an array of social media sites, have transformed news content, news gather-
ing and news publishing. For example RSS is an alert that contains a headline and short
summary of the information and automatically generated when movement is detected on a
site. In effect this process allows the user to configure a personal news gathering service and
access it twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The extent of this transformation is
evident in the State of the News Media 2010 report which claims:

The year past proved important for social media establishing themselves as a
part of the media ecosystem. The power here had less to do with reporting
than serving as a place for people to quickly come together around an issue that
they feel passionately about to share concerns, pass along information, offer
financial contributions and in several cases bring about change.

(State of the News Media 2010 report)

However, relevant to any discussion of ‘news’ is its relationship to ‘truth’ as a key
assumption of democracy is organised around the idea of merit and a group of indi-
viduals testing out uncertain or unformed judgements in a public sphere (Habermas,
1995). However influencing public opinion formation and ‘agenda setting’ is also a
central objective of public relations. A highly produced message to ameliorate nega-
tive opinion, inserted invisibly within the news, is a way many offending organisa-
tions that have breached laws or regulations attempt to influence the way their
actions are interpreted and reinterpreted by ‘publics’. So public relations, truth, and news
have inherent tensions within democratic frameworks (Breit, 2007, see also Mackey in
this volume); but these relationships and their interaction with the public sphere
become even more complex with the advent of cyber technologies. Ariella Azoulay
points out that cameras, photographs and the internet have caused structural changes to the public sphere and argues that ‘a virtual public space now operates in parallel to the public sphere’ (2001: 138). Therefore not only can we conceive of sites such as Second Life and Facebook as grooming passive publics, but also as reworked public spheres, where news is distributed and consumed, and where the notion of public space – and its allied ideas of ‘publics’ and ‘community’ – are now invisibly fused together. And it is these changes that also play an important role in the hybridisation of public relations and the way it practises. This is also evident in the non-commercial sphere where bloggers, in the same way as journalists, are now regarded by public relations as important opinion leaders and relationships with them are cultivated.

So what sort of public sphere exists in Second Life and Facebook? Is it open, inclusive, tolerant and critical or exclusive and controlled? Who are the authorities that validate public opinion? What critical dimensions do these new conditions encourage? What views and ideas are being promoted? These questions, which pertain to the characteristics of the reworked public sphere, are significant because Beck argues that the information technology may be the means that ‘could be used to short-circuit the power of public opinion’ and through which a new authoritarianism will emerge (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 60). So, for example, what relationship do the plethora of unfettered narcissistic subjectivities being filtered through commercial social media have to individuals’ political development? For Beck (in Beck & Willms, 2004: 137) important questions are: ‘Who decides what counts as a cause and what doesn’t, in the face of the complexity and contingency of knowledge, and the difficulty of fully establishing a causality? What norms underlie this process? And what types of cause interpretation does governing opinion accept as valid?’

One norm established in modern culture is a ‘tell all’ culture, voyeurism, and the idea of a private conversation in public. Indeed, Calvert asks: ‘Why are so many people so willing to overshare, as it were, so much about their lives with so many people?’ (2000: 83). A corollary of this is the willingness to provide vast amounts of personal information to social media sites. Yet another is the growing acceptance of numeric cultures, spurred on by the technical affordances of the web, which make it relatively easy to track what is being said and who has said it. Data mining is a commercial activity that is growing in tandem with the vast amounts of information being stored on the web and can be defined as ‘finding hidden information in a database’. Alternatively, it has been called exploratory data analysis, data-driven discovery, and deductive learning (Dunham, 2003: 3). Thus social media, seemingly relaxed and friendly, provides a unique opportunity for PR to undertake surveillance and develop extensive demographic and psychographic profiles of publics. Once patterns are established from the mined data it can be classified and on-sold (Dunham 2003: 3–5). However, organisations’ ability to extract complex personal data, coupled with the new compulsion to disclose information, has consequences for openness in society. An individual’s or group’s online behaviour and communication – whether their purchase history or political activity – can be accessed, commodified and privately investigated. Arguably, it means there is a plethora of new ways for public relations to watch and detect personal activity in unseen and therefore less accountable ways.
Moreover, ‘listening’ on social media is so easy. Twitter is a text-based news-gathering service that represents its identity as the personal, the simple and the everyday – within a global and networked community. Despite the dissimilarity to conventional press, Twitter is ‘increasingly becoming highly effective as a way of disseminating news. It works like a personal newswire’ (Brown, 2009: 140). Twitter, like Second Life and Facebook, requires the user to become a member in order to fully participate in the forum. ‘The service asks its users only one question: “What are you doing?” Its users have just 140 characters in which to express themselves’ (Newson et al., 2009: 67). These updates are measured in popularity by the amount of ‘followers’ they attract. However this website advice shows how easy it is for comments to become public property and for business to ‘win, win, and win’:

Monitor who is talking about you on Twitter (for example, SocialMention.com). When someone mentions you then find out if they have a blog. If they do get them to write a blog about some aspect of your company, they are probably looking for ideas for articles (just like the ‘real’ press). So your network expands so does traffic to your site, so your reputation and awareness improves. At the same time so does Google’s pagerank view of the importance of your website, so you appear higher in Google results. Win, win, win.

(Kothea The Fabric Blog)

These developments in social media have not escaped politicians. US President Barack Obama made these comments in relation to Facebook while addressing school children: ‘First of all, I want everybody here to be careful about what you post on Facebook, because in the YouTube age whatever you do, it will be pulled up again later somewhere in your life.’ Thus media monitoring on sites like Second Life, Facebook and Twitter has refocused surveillance as core function of public relations and provided it with new ways that it can operate out of view. Indeed being ‘out of view’ is where PR wants to be. Concealing its presence ensures that it is the illusion of public opinion interacting through sites like Twitter that provides the ideal conditions that hegemonically resolve inherent tensions with broader ideals of democracy.

This is also apparent in social media such as Second Life that attempt to replicate the public sphere as it works in the offline world. For example Linden Research Inc. promotes the representation of Second Life as an alternative society, complete with all the complexity of political dimensions and the processes by which public opinion is formed. For example, activities are reported in ‘in-world’ media outlets such as the ‘The Second Life Herald’, ‘Second Life Times’ and ‘New World Notes’. Linden Research Inc. uses these fake news sources to blur further the boundaries between the real world and the fabricated. Moreover, to entrench the fabrication of a public sphere they seek the involvement of real-life media outlets such as NewsCorp, NBC, Sky News and Reuters. Drawing on the ideas of Habermas (1995), news content on Second Life serves merely to detour public opinion back to the unseen authority’s
self-interest rather than to an authentic public sphere where a dialectic can clarify and define contentious issues.

Twitter, Facebook and Second Life therefore make a claim as authentic forms of the public sphere and this is tacitly endorsed whenever an offline institution links to them. Indeed in Australia, Twitter has successfully colonised publicly owned (non-commercial) news broadcasting service the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and it is regularly advertised as a communication channel for audiences, on both radio and television. Linking into these social media sites brings other benefits for organisations. Being members of Facebook and Twitter allows them to post an online press release, test out public responses by undertaking a ‘kite-flying’ exercise around controversial ideas and monitor the response. However the populist approach to deciding on the significance of ‘news’ raises concerns about its true value. Bivins (2009: 262) asks ‘whether any of this activity constitutes “news” … Because the information generated is generally done by “citizens”, it is often done without the interference, or aid of editors’. Moreover the potential for misleading authorship or online-astroturfing is expanding.

A key weakness in these developments from a Habermasian perspective is that while the involvement of real-world media and other organisations in Facebook, Second Life and Twitter appear to some to have expanded the public sphere, arguably this is not the case. Rather, the public sphere has merely lost its political characteristics and is therefore more disposed in character as a forum for the persuasion and control of publics (Habermas, 1995: 163). A possible political consequence of this social and media confluence is ‘democratic authoritarianism’ which gives governments ‘increased possibilities for domestic surveillance and control’ (Beck in Beck & Willms, 2004: 92–93).

Apprehension that surveillance practices may be increasingly used as a form of social control in online cultures justifies further the need to understand what precisely is happening on these sites. One group concerned with these questions is TOR. This non-profit group challenges the notion that ‘transparency is good’ and asks more pertinently ‘who is it good for and is there really transparency’. According to TOR’s Andrew Lewman, for ordinary web users, ‘it’s time to get past the idea that being secretive on the web is necessarily a negative or bad thing’. They ask users to try to find out who is running the website they are interested in and predict that they may find it difficult. Privacy concerns and groups like TOR therefore challenge embedded technocratic belief in technology by asking if individuals are merely caught up in a vast organisation – in which discussion about limiting it has become sacrilegious (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, The Deep Web).

Conclusion

Relaxed, playful and self-selecting, social relations are reorganised on the internet but with the transformation of ‘tradition’ comes the desire to find new certainties. Social media – with its multiplicity of technical affordances funnelled through the relic of community – appeals to highly individualised subjects by promoting an artificial sense
of empowerment around notions of ‘choice’. However, while social media and its associated cultural effects appear novel and contemporary, this is not necessarily the case. Forty years ago Gordon Rattray Taylor (1970) flagged the prospect of a future where individuals were politically disempowered and rendered ‘helpless’ through ‘a propaganda of loyalty evoking symbols and abstractions’ within the complex cultural effects of cyber technology (1970: 299). Together with Beck’s (in Beck & Willms, 2004) views about radicalised individualisation and its false sense of empowerment; this suggests that these social currents are well established and conclusions for society are mixed.

‘Culture making’ always has political consequences for society and culture (Fiske 1989: 1) and the sheer scale of these new developments online deserve more attention. Today the internet presents a range of new and novel discursive practices through which groups and people can mobilise and interact. On the one hand, for publics, parts of the internet afford cultural resources that work to create an authentic public sphere with political characteristics that promote agency, and depth of discussion and debate. However, on the other, the internet, especially social media, is a colossal economic and cultural force which has penetrated society in a number of concerning ways. Central to these concerns is its potential to be a powerful discursive forum for social and political control that has invisibly positioned itself in relation to publics and indeed many large public organisations. This together with the constant demands of a 24-hour news cycle, flourishing cultures of populism and narcissism and the proliferation of subjective commentary means governments may find it harder to engage publics with complexity and achieve the long term reform that is so urgent in the light of current environmental challenges.

These paradoxical consequences were foreshadowed by Bauman who, prior to the advent of Web 2.0, cautioned about effects of ‘the new soft world of communities’ claiming that the elevation of micro-style democracy could obscure the groups and individuals that offer vision and viable solutions to society’s problems in the clutter of competing voices and views (Bauman 1997: 81). If Bauman’s analysis can be projected on developments in social media, then it seems highly likely that the culture of tolerating differences may ironically create a splintered form of individualisation characterised by aggressive self-interest, which undercuts reform agendas, depth of discussion and debate, and the unity of communities.

To find comfort in a rapidly changing world, the ideas of ‘community’, ‘place’ and ‘friendship’ has been reconstituted for internet cultures. A relevant question for society and for public relations is how does this translate offline? What sort of community, friends and places are being created and what is their relation to political persuasion? One effect may be a greater tolerance of ‘spin’ and gullibility. Exaggeration – once a source of derision for public relations – is now legitimised by social media where self promotion and narcissism are normatively embedded both culturally and technologically. Another effect may be an aversion to complexity and depth in relation to public debates. The lack of critical perspectives in social media in turn could potentially lead to more power and influence for public relations practitioners, in which case limits to activities such as surveillance need to be considered by
professional associations alongside its relationship to privacy and ethics. This will shed further light on how public relations practices used on the internet will affect cultural values, constructions of knowledge and the distribution of power – both within the internet and its communities and ‘offline’ in broader contexts of culture and society.

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