Changing vistas in public relations theory

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Contemporary theorists are opening new ways to think about public relations. Public relations textbook authors have hitherto borrowed theories from the adjacent disciplines of communication, psychology, sociology, and organisation studies. At the end of the twentieth century, J. Grunig's four-model concept of public relations was the only modern theoretical approach that could be said to have originated from within public relations scholarship. And as we will see, even J. Grunig's perspective is rooted in political theory. But the 21ˢᵗ century's burgeoning critical and professional interest in ethical public relations has produced a flurry of discipline-specific, theoretical initiatives.

J. Grunig's emphasis on the symmetrical

J. Grunig's ongoing defence and development of his 'symmetrical' approach to public relations theory has been the touchstone of much public relations theoretical work over the last two decades. His insistence on 'symmetry' has its roots in:

> …a theory of politics called interest group liberalism…Interest group liberalism views the political system as a mechanism for open competition among interest or issue groups. Interest group liberalism looks to citizen groups to champion interests of ordinary people against unresponsive government and corporate structures (J. Grunig, 1989, pp. 37-39; J. Grunig & White, 1992, p. 44). [Same quote appears both places.]

In 1984, J. Grunig and Hunt advocated the 'symmetrical model' of public relations over the 'asymmetrical', 'information', and 'press agent/publicity' models (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984,

pp. 21-43). J. Grunig held to this claim despite the admission that most people believe professional public relations is best described as operating to an 'asymmetrical' rather than a 'symmetrical model'. The 'asymmetrical model' represents public relations programs aimed at advancing the standing and the projects of the organisation that pays for public relations work. 'Asymmetrical' programs are not aimed at advancing the interests of the publics involved with the sponsoring organisation to the same extent:

> Some critics of the symmetrical worldview - both practitioners and theorists - claim that the approach is unrealistic or idealistic. They argue that organisations hire public relations people as advocates to advance their interests and not as "do-gooders" who "give in" to outsiders with an agenda different from that of the organisation. In short, these critics believe that organisations would not hire a public relations person who does not practice asymmetrically (J. Grunig & White, 1992, p. 46).

J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1992) none-the-less claim that there are findings that symmetrical public relations programs are the most effective. Symmetrical public relations programs are those that try to make sure the targeted publics benefit as much as the programs' sponsors or originators:

> Although research supports the idea that the two-way symmetrical model makes public relations more ethical, senior managers of organisations who are oriented to the bottom line also want to know whether it pays for their organisations to be ethical. Research to

date suggests that it does. Several studies have shown the ineffectiveness of the press agentry, public information, and two-way asymmetrical models (p. 308).

Critics of the symmetrical model raise objections such as:

> It is simply absurd to suggest that an interaction between, for example the Shell Oil company and a public consisting of unskilled workers in a developing country can be symmetrical just because the interaction is symmetrical in form. It is even more absurd to suggest the reverse, that the interaction between this worker public and Shell Oil can be symmetrical if the workers adopt the correct attitude and are willing to compromise (Leitch *&* Neilson, 1997, p. 19).

J. Grunig's more recent response to such critics is:

> Both the disciples of the symmetrical theory and critical scholars who debunk it seem to have reconstructed the theory inaccurately in their minds-to the extent that the theory appears to be ridiculous. In my conceptualisation by contrast, symmetrical public relations does not take place in an ideal situation where competing interests come together with goodwill to resolve their differences because they share a goal of social equilibrium and harmony. Rather it takes place in situations where groups come together to protect and enhance their self-interests. Argumentation, debate and persuasion take place. But dialogue, listening, understanding and relationship building also occur because they are more effective in resolving conflict than are one-way attempts at compliance gaining (J. Grunig, 2001, p. 18).

The rhetorical theory approach to public relations

Heath has taken a major initiative to try to make rhetorical theory the primary perspective through which public relations should be understood. Heath explains his view of the rhetorical process in his *Handbook of Public Relations* (Heath, 2001).

> This book champions humans' commitment to rhetorical dialogue as the process for forging conclusions and influencing actions. The process is a two-way one. Through statement and counterstatement, people test each other's views of reality, value, and choices relevant to products, services and public policies (p. 31).

Rhetoric, like PR, has negative connotations. However, the term originated as the surely very welcome mode of persuasive discourse that accompanied the advent of putative democracy. It was an important aspect of the way complex, ancient Greek society governed itself through public debate and persuasion, rather like our present court and parliamentary processes, reducing the need for oppression and violence. (Slaves, women and many others in ancient Greece of course did not share in this democracy.) For Heath, the public relations practitioner and the client whom they represent are engaged, rather like ancient rhetors, in a "wrangle in the marketplace".... "Professional communicators have a major voice in the marketplace of ideas – the dialogue on behalf of various self interests" (Heath, 1992, pp. 17-20). Heath echoes J. Grunig's 'symmetry' when he says that this wrangle must be conducted on the basis of a level playing field in order for it to constitute ethical public relations practice:

> A rhetorical view presumes that, in terms of their right to speak, all parties are symmetrical...In a utopia people have

what they need and have no reason for dispute-rhetoric or public relations. Thus public relations as a discipline seeks to advance marketplace and public policy discourse by pursuing relational excellence in actions (organisational responsibility) and discourse that lead to the co-creation, co-management, or co-definition of meaning (zones of meaning) that reconcile strains and alienation and foster mutually beneficial relationships (Heath, 2001, p. 35).

Heath suggests that rhetoric "is symmetrical because each idea placed in the marketplace or public policy arena stands on its own merits" (Heath, 2001, p. 49). For critics, however, it is not clear how what Heath calls "rhetorical enactment rationale" makes public relations more ethical or acceptable, except if those engaged in contesting their views are equally resourced. This of course, as in the Leitch and Nielson critique of J. Grunig above, is often an impossible situation. We are led to the conclusion that, like "symmetrical public relations", "rhetorical enactment rationale" is another 'ideal type' of public relations – a theoretical construct against which the ethicality and efficacy of public relations initiatives in a democratic society can be compared.

For Skerlep (2001), there is an advantage in the rhetorical theoretical approach towards public relations in that it allows public relations people to gain other perspectives on situations in a way that problematises the notion of 'Truth'. 'Truth' is often a very contested terrain when interest groups are in public confrontation. Skerlep suggests:

> The naïve belief in truth, objectivity and impartiality as the normative criteria of validity of public relations discourse that is professed by public relations textbooks does not elucidate on the discursive dimension of polemical confrontations…the positivistic concept of truth [has] become controversial with the

ascent of postmodern relativism…" (p. 183).

Skerlep underlines Aristotle's realisation that rhetorical argumentation – the open public contest of ideas as advocated by Heath – does not lead to 'absolute truths'. But this does not mean that the rhetor is allowed to speak untruths or to manipulate the public either. Instead: "In the situation of public contention on a controversial issue the speaker can only marshal the best arguments for his or her case…The 'truth' can only be reached through argumentative dialogue that reveals which of the participating parties has better arguments" (p. 183). This is probably an approach that many environmental and human welfare lobby groups would reject. Such groups would point to empirical studies to argue that there IS a 'truth' to do with environmental protection or public health.

Public relations as relationship management

An important public relations theory initiative in 2000 was the publication of the book *Public Relations as Relationship Management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations,* edited by Ledingham and Bruning. The editors claim in their introduction that:

> The emergence of relationship management as a paradigm for public relations scholarship and practice calls into question the essence of public relations - what it is and what it does or should do, its function and value within the organisational structure and the greater society, and the benefits generated not only for the sponsoring organisations but also for the publics those organisations serve and the communities and societies in which they exist (p. xiii).

The 'relational management' approach to public relations is centred on the 'dimensions' or 'parameters' of "relationship management". These

dimensions or parameters are aspects in the relationship between the organisation sponsoring the public relations work and the target of that project. They are factors in the relationship such as:

Adaptation
Assuring legitimacy
Asymmetry [unequal power]
Being constructive
Being open
Commitment
Cooperation
Creating win-win situations
Credibility
Efficiency [synergy]
Interdependence/power imbalance
Intimacy
Investment
Legitimacy [justification]
Mutual goals
Necessity [legal requirements]
Networking – common friends
Openness
Passion
Performance satisfaction
Reciprocity [cooperation]
Satisfaction
Shared technology
Sharing tasks
Social bonds
Stability [the need to avoid unwanted changes]
Structural bonds
Trust
Understanding
Openness
Involvement
Investment

(For a proper understanding of what is meant by each of the above terms it is probably necessary to read and study Ledingham and Bruning's book. Another article would be necessary to micro-critique each term.)

Advocates of the relationship management approach say that various inclusions and absences of these 'dimensions' are often unproblematically conflated within the term 'relationship' (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000, p. 14). That is, often authors do not say which of the above aspects of 'relationship' they are referring to, nor which they do not mean, when they use the term 'relationship'. They imply that better analysis of such components would enable people to understand public relations better. In the 'relational' paradigm the aspects or 'dimensions' of a relationship may not be symmetrical. There may not be equivalent access or ownership of such things as: shared technology; sharing tasks; social bonds; stability (the need to avoid unwanted changes): structural bonds (employment, contracts). Even such concepts as "trust", "openness", or "satisfaction" do not imply a necessary symmetrical reciprocity. For these reasons it is hard to compare the relationship management approach to public relations directly with the J. Grunig or Heath approaches above. It could be argued that 'relationship management' may in fact be more of an instrumental procedure. It may be an approach to mapping a multitude of ways public relations may be 'done' rather than a way to get to the essence of any normative notion of what public relations 'is' or should be. This is despite Ledingham and Bruning's claim to "a paradigm for public relations scholarship and practice" in their introduction (2000, p. xiii). Another possibility is that 'relationship management' is to do with a rediscovery, elaboration, and analysis of the 'goodwill' aspect of public relations, an aspect which is still prominent in some definitions that descend from the UK definition of public relations:

Public relations is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an

organisation and its publics (Institute of Public Relations [UK], 2002).

Many of the above-listed 'aspects' or 'dimensions', such as trust, openness, reciprocity, social bonds, and so on, can be collapsed into the notion of "goodwill". But goodwill can serve many purposes, not all of them necessarily 'symmetrical', i.e. fair to all, and thus legitimate in terms of either J. Grunig's or Heath's paradigms. See also J. Grunig's dismissal of "goodwill" as an element in public relations situations where he is last quoted above. The relational approach can thus be argued to be an elaboration of public relations as "goodwill" which leaves in abeyance attempts to get to the essence of the role public relations really plays in society.

Public relations as engendered practice

Toth (2001) suggests that organisations make choices about the careers of the increasing numbers of women entering public relations "based not on merit but rather on gender" (Toth, 2001, p. 245). L. Grunig, Toth, and Hon (2000, p. 49), compare the posited "feminist values" of "cooperation, respect, caring, nurturance (sic), interconnection, justice, equity, honesty, sensitivity, perceptiveness, intuition, altruism, fairness, morality and commitment" with the "norms of public relations practice." They find the latter wanting. The above authors imply that there are feminine attributes that make women particularly suited to carry out public relations work. They further suggest that, despite this suitability, a 'masculine ideology' dominates senior public relations management levels. This ideology discriminates against the appointment of women to senior levels and opposes the promotion of feminine values when public relations strategy is decided:

> Over the past 10 years, gender discrepancies in hiring, salaries, and promotion have been found in quantitative

and qualitative studies in public relations. Although there have been a few critics of these studies, surveys and focus groups continue to offer valid and reliable statistics and experiences attesting to the fact that, although the public relations profession is almost 70% women today, men are often favoured for hiring, higher salaries, and promotions to management positions (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, p. 103).

Aldoory and Toth contribute to what they call "burgeoning theory in this area" (p. 123). They suggest that the "scholarly body of knowledge in public relations requires its own theory of gender discrimination in a gendered profession" (p. 124). Their review of studies compares career discrimination against women in public relations with career discrimination against women in other areas such as marketing. They find that women are discriminated against for the usual reasons: being looked upon as home makers and child bearers; for socially held notions of the role and psychology of women (e.g. that women are not, or should not be, aggressive); that 'career women' are the exception, and so on. However, Aldoory and Toth theorise that, in public relations, there is an additional concern because:

> (A)s the number of men decreases throughout the profession, attempts to recruit and retain them become stronger. These stronger attempts lead to favouritism towards males in terms of salaries, promotions and benefits…[This] leads to a lack of attention towards young women's needs for skills and knowledge, such as negotiation tactics and assertiveness (p. 124).

This downgrading of women's employment is despite suggestions that women tend to have better social and psychological 'values' than men to carry out 'symmetrical' public relations (L. Grunig, et al., 2000, p. 59). In the view of many leading public relations theorists, as we have seen,

symmetrical public relations is the best form of public relations. Discussion about attitudes towards engendered values and roles is hard to summarise without making stereotypical generalisations. Leading female scholars of public relations L. Grunig, et al. (2000) make the point that:

> (M)uch confusion surrounds any discussion of women and public relations. When we think about women, are we really thinking about gender, which we consider biological, or a constellation of socially determined sex roles, which encompass stereotypical qualities associated with either femininity or masculinity? We all know that not all people biologically classified as "women" act alike. People of either gender may have feminine characteristics. We value the qualities associated with femininity, but of course not all women exhibit female characteristics or are feminine. Not all men act "masculine" and not all traits considered masculine are antithetical to feminism (p. 54).

Having pointed out the problems, L. Grunig, et al., (2000) say:

> Some scholars (e.g., J. E. Grunig, 1992) have suggested that the most effective public relations grows out of an entire world view that is feminine. That is, public relations that is practiced as balanced, two-way communication between an organisation and its stakeholder groups stands to make the greatest contribution to organisational effectiveness (p. 59).

L. Grunig, et al. then associate the "feminist values" which are listed at the start of this section: "cooperation, respect, caring…" etc, as those values that best orient a public relations strategist towards the two-way symmetrical attitude.

Rae (2002), however, thinks that the next generation of public relations workers will see a leveling of perceived differences between how men and women public relations workers think and behave. Rae goes further than L. Grunig et al. to stress that the present suggested differences are more generational-cultural than genetically determined. For Rae, gender pre-disposition towards symmetrical public relations will change as male and female cultural stereotypes change away from archetypical expectations of the differential 'natures' and behaviours of 'Men' and 'Women'.

> Men who remain antagonistic to women and to women getting ahead will find themselves increasingly marginalised over time. The modern public relations industry will be reflective of the enormous changes in gender relations and roles sweeping though society. Therefore, the industry will be best placed to understand and represent the interests of clients and of society (Rae, 2002, conclusion).

Community interests, change and empowerment through public relations

Some recent theories verge on an alternative politics of public relations. Holtzhausen, for example, advocates a postmodern perspective on public relations. She implies that management thinking within major organisations needs to be critiqued by public relations people to challenge dominant ideas that overlook the diversity of views and perspectives current in the postmodern condition of society. By 'postmodern society' she means a society where political, cultural, social, and economic views and mores are very diverse. In postmodernism there is no one guiding principle as there is in a theocracy, or a society guided by 'scientific progress', or as is implied by the expression 'The American Dream'.

As the public relations person is often the conscience and the spokesperson/advisor of organisations, the responsibility for this

postmodern critique importantly resides in the public relations department:

> Postmodern theories urge public relations practitioners to acknowledge the political nature of their activities and to be aware of the power relations inherent in everyday practice. Public relations is about change or resistance to change, these political acts are manifest in the everyday use of organisational language and symbolism and are influenced by the organisation's cultural and social environment. This redefines the boundary spanning role. Instead of claiming objectivity, practitioners are forced to choose which side they are on (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 110).

Holzhausen gives examples from South Africa of an internal corporate communications department persuading a tourism board to align with animal rights activists to campaign against a government policy to cull elephants. The same department assisted in a trade union linked campaign to oppose discrimination against black people and women within the tourist board. Holzhausen says:

> It should be the responsibility of the public relations function to create opportunities for dissent, for opening up opportunities for debates without forcing consensus, to create possibilities for change…Scholars and practitioners can create a postmodern condition by being critical and by exposing the irony and contradictions of public relations practice (pp. 105-111).

Holzhausen is clearly the most radical of the public relations theorists discussed so far and it is not obvious how the necessarily changing political conditions of South Africa can be projected generally. Her ideas are to some extent in line with Heath's notion of rhetorical dialogue, although it is not clear that Heath has in mind internal dialogue rather than dialogue between cohesive organisations and other groups who have other perspectives. Interestingly, J. Grunig sees Holzhausen's 'internal revolutionary' ideas as in line with his own strictures for organisations to be symmetrical with their publics: "I concur with Derina Holzhausen that public relations is a postmodern force in organisations that gives voice to public in management decision making - an in-house activist" J. Grunig (personal communication, January 24, 2001).

Another element challenging established public relations thinking is the omnipresent Internet. Authors such as Blood (2000), note the obvious point that the Internet has made protest against corporations and other dominant organisations easier. But they go on to explain that the Internet has also created a new class of protesters. Blood refers to the "micro-activists". These are individualists opposed to capitalism, but also opposed to big organisations such as political parties of the left and organisations such as Greenpeace. Micro-activists believe such campaigning organisations compromise and 'sell-out'. They are all part of the "oppressionism" of a violent and environmentally malfunctioning world. While rejecting macro organisation, the Internet enables micro-activists to cooperate very effectively as they did at Seattle (pp. 165-169). Similar 'lateral connection' changes can be observed among corporations' stakeholders facilitated by the increasing adoption and development in sophistication of the Internet (de Bussy, Watson, Pitt, & Ewing, 2000). What writings on Internet activists and writings on stakeholders' use of the Internet both indicate for the public relations theorist is that simple models of communication between 'an organisation and its publics' are either redundant, or at least should be viewed with the utmost suspicion. This puts into question simple communication models such as the 'sender-receiver' model and such concepts as 'opinion leaders', 'third party endorsement' via journalism, 'gate-keeping' by editors, and 'agenda setting' through sponsorship, event management,

and other tactics. Though these concepts may still have some relevance, theories of communication are needed that help map the apparently teeming and far harder to see and understand lateral communication between targeted publics and others. Simplistic concepts of symmetrical communication would seem to be made redundant by this realisation. However, J. Grunig's alignment with public relations as postmodern activism would seem to keep his approach abreast of the fragmented and multi-directional nature of contemporary public relations influences. It is not clear how Heath's rhetorical approach is implicated in Internet developments other than to say that Heath welcomes dialogue. In an attempt to tackle this conundrum Fawkes and Gregory have a paper on 'Applying Communication Theories to the Internet' in the same (2000) volume as Blood and de Bussy et al. Fawkes and Gregory's synthesis of 'the Westley and MacLean'; 'Maletzke'; and 'Uses and Gratifications' models is too complex to go into here. It indicates a possible whole new and undeveloped realm of public relations theory.

Conclusion

This article has sought to introduce the various contemporary theories of public relations that have come in a rush over the last few years. Many of these new developments contrast with the non-critical 'process' approach of former theories which were, and still are, 'borrowed' from adjacent disciplines and inserted into public relations textbooks in a rather simplistic fashion. Relationship management theory would seem however to be more of a 'process' theory than a theory lending itself to the social critique of public relations. With this exception, the majority of contemporary theorists show themselves to be concerned about public relations' role and nature in a plural society that is becoming even more postmodern and difficult to stereotype. The advent of the Internet and the need for a more intelligent social critique expose much 'traditional' textbook public relations theory as wanting.

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Systems theory is a useful way for public relations practitioners to understand the relationship between an organization and its publics and the role of public relations within an organization. Continuum (not either/o). For additional information, see Grunig, Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management). Closed v/ Open. Internal orientation / External orientation. Dialogue is defined as "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions". Public relations can facilitate dialogue by establishing channels and procedures for dialogic communication. Dialogic theory argues that organizations should be willing to interact with publics in honest and ethical ways in order to create effective organization-public communication channels. The power balance between public relations and journalism is shifting as a result of digitalisation. To examine how the relationship between journalism and PR has changed in the digital age of "anything goes", Lloyd and Toogood interviewed 40 communication experts and journalists from the Anglo-Saxon hemisphere. The outcome is something which might not pass the peer review process of scientific journals but is nevertheless more useful than most "empirically sound" studies published by such journals. Media researchers there have analysed how nonsense and conspiracy theories are spreading on social networks, like Facebook, compared to information that has been checked by scientists or professional journalists.