

Editorial

Rethinking public relations

Political strategists, market research firms, think tanks, lobbyists, media advisors, third party mobilizers and ‘grassroots’ organizers, social media gurus, and other communication specialists have flourished in size and influence and transformed the role of communication in social, political, and economic life. Critics decry the expansion of professionalized communication, impugning the public relations (PR), polling, advertising, and marketing industries for overpowering the media with a torrent of sound-byte journalism, spin control, and 24-hour campaigning, and thus undermining the political process and civic discourse (e.g., Rampton & Stauber, 1995). In his research note, featured in this issue, Matt Soar uses war terminology (“commercial carpet bombing”) to characterize the impact of the ad industry, in particular, on the civic landscape: “[a] city skyline awash in prominent logos,” he writes, “is indicative of a profound imbalance between the wants of marketers and the needs of citizens.” Others are less discouraged by the rise and intensification of promotion and publicity in the public sphere and see potential for expanding, rather than restricting, the democratic process. One recent book argues that we have entered a period of “public relations democracy” in which more news sources operating outside the traditional institutions and arenas of power are exercising influence over how media report on political, cultural, and economic affairs (Davis, 2002). Such “pluralist optimism” brings to mind Ray Hiebert’s famous statement that “without public relations, democracy could not succeed in a mass society” (1966, p. 7).¹

The growth in PR, and the professionalization of promotional communication generally, can be attributed to myriad cultural, political, and economic forces: the broader changes associated with globalization, including the development of new information and communication technologies; the emergence, expansion, and contestation of market capitalism (in its neo-liberal and other guises); the increasing importance of symbolic and promotional labour; and the revitalization of the public sphere, where new, emerging forms of grievance and risk are defined, contested, and amplified (e.g., Knight & Greenberg, 2002). The articles, research notes, commentaries, and reviews that appear in this special issue address continuities and changes in public relations and professional communication practice. We argue that against the backdrop of these changes, communication (especially persuasive and instrumental forms of communication) has become a more salient feature of the cultural landscape of late modern society. In different ways, the issue takes up the challenge of rethinking public relations.

The contributions comprising this issue fall into two main categories. The first category consists of those that discuss the application of PR and related practices of promotional communication to particular issues and topics. These include

Josh Greenberg and Charlene Elliott's analysis of how Maple Leaf Foods handled the listeriosis crisis and the role of "conspicuous apologetics" in managing the reactions of consumers and other key stakeholders; Jennifer Lees-Marshment's analysis of political marketing outside of an electoral context; Gwendolyn Blue's insights into the branding of beef in the aftermath of declining meat consumption compounded by health risks associated with "mad cow" disease; Ira Basen's perspective on the way that the Conservative Party of Canada seized the initiative in framing Stéphane Dion as a weak and ineffectual leader; Melissa Aronczyk's insights about nation branding in the context of globalization; and Matt Soar's discussion of the hypercommercialization of civic landscapes.

The second, smaller group of articles is concerned with the profession and practice of public relations. Stefan Wehmeier looks at public relations as a body of research and knowledge that lacks its own distinctiveness and autonomy. Using the perspective of "dirty work," Amy Thurlow discusses the perennial stigma facing public relations professionals that they are just "spin doctors" engaged in manipulating the truth on behalf of powerful and wealthy interests. Finally, Boyd Neil's critical review of Ira Basen's award-winning radio documentary on public relations, *Spin Cycles*, offers some insight into how PR practitioners deal with negative portrayals of who they are and what they do.

Despite the diversity of interests and perspectives represented by these contributions, there are a number of overlapping and recurring themes. The first is that public relations is closely tied to other forms of organizational communication such as advertising, marketing and branding, lobbying, issues management, and social responsibility initiatives. The level of integration between these different types of communication may now be so developed that it makes more sense, as Wehmeier notes, to speak of communication management as a generalized organizational strategy rather than a repertoire of tactics. The integration of these different aspects of communication also reflects the continuous nature of organizational communication. The salience of the different aspects may shift over time, but communication management is an ongoing process. Lees-Marshment shows in her discussion of political marketing how permanent campaigning is now a feature of political life in democratic countries. Political parties, whether in government or opposition, engage in the constant gathering and dissemination of information to strike the elusive balance between representing and leading their constituents. Part of effective political marketing and public relations lies in recognizing that particular successes, whether deflating a crisis or promoting a new policy, generate public expectations of future performance that feed back into the calculation of further communication. Communication becomes reflexive; it is simultaneously a process of managing public reaction in the present and anticipating expectations from different stakeholders (citizens, shareholders, policymakers, critics/opponents, et cetera) in the future.

The integration and overlap of the different aspects of organizational communication reflects the identity problems of public relations as a profession and field of knowledge and expertise. Thurlow's examination of sense-making practices by PR professionals demonstrates that despite their ethical commitment to

honest and transparent communication practices, practitioners are constantly aware of the popular image of public relations as manipulative and deceptive and constrained by the fact that they work on behalf of clients or employers whose interests are, in the final analysis, determinant. Cutting across the tension between ethics and interests are the gender inequalities that continue to characterize the field. Despite the feminization of the PR sector over previous decades, women continue to occupy mostly technical roles in which they are tasked with implementing public relations strategy; men, by comparison, predominate in managerial positions where strategic decision-making is concentrated. The lack of a unified identity also reflects the absence of an autonomous body of theoretical knowledge on which the principles of practice are based. Wehmeier's Delphi study reveals that international public relations experts see the field as continuing to draw on other, related disciplines such as communication and sociology for its theoretical and cognitive orientation and empirical frames of reference. The one area of convergence the study found is toward a managerial perspective, which may only serve to reinforce the tendency for public relations to be seen as dominated by the interests of powerful actors.

The integration of public relations and other forms of organizational communication as well as the identity challenges of the profession and its knowledge base also reflect the ways that communication management deals first and foremost with problematic issues and events. Whether it is public perceptions of risk associated with food products, the relentless competitive relationship between political parties seeking to maximize comparative advantage at the expense of their opponents, or the status of national identity in a globalizing world, organizational communication addresses itself to issues, events, or processes that threaten established structures of value and interest. Managing the threat of crisis, risk, and instability has always been central to public relations as both an art and science of communication. Whether one equates it with "spin doctoring" or not, public relations is about generating and sustaining trust within asymmetrical relationships where one party is dependent on the knowledge, sincerity, and actions of another.

The problematic of trust is illustrated in the articles by Greenberg & Elliott and Blue, respectively, who, addressing different cases, argue that tainted food products create crises not only because they victimize, but also because they undermine trust in a way that can extend beyond the immediate radius of harm. Crises always entail the calculation of risks—managing risk by containing its spread and intensification then becomes the long-term goal of organizational communication. Risk management reinforces integration of the different aspects of communication—advertising, branding, marketing, social responsibility practices, lobbying, et cetera—because of the generalized uncertainty, doubt, and anxiety that risk engenders. Risk is virtual and multifaceted. Its different aspects (such as economic, medical, or environmental) create a situation in which public relations must relate to different areas of knowledge and expertise, and align with other forms of organizational communication.

In the political realm, public relations is also about generating crisis and risk as well as containing them. This is because political communication management

deals with issues and relationships that are not only problematic and asymmetrical, but also structurally rather than contingently adversarial and competitive. As Basen shows in his analysis of the Conservative Party's framing of Stéphane Dion, public relations becomes strategic communication when it succeeds in generating problems for one's opponents as a way to gain advantage as well as distract media and popular attention elsewhere. The aim of denigrating the former Liberal leader was not only to undermine public trust in his ability to perform his role in the present, but also to portray him and his party as a risky prospect to form a future government. Adversarial communication may lie less in outright fabrication than in seizing opportunity, occupying a space left vacant by one's competitors, in order to re-combine, re-reflect, and exploit symbolic elements that already exist. And if those elements are provided by one's opponents themselves, Basen argues, then all-the-better. The recombinant nature of competitive communication is also illustrated in Aronczyk's perspective on nation branding, which raises the question of a brand's rhetorical effect in terms of caring as well as belief. The goal of branding is to make the nation matter, not only to its own citizens but to the wider world beyond its boundaries as well. And as Greenberg and Elliott argue, crises are not only situational but threaten to expand into other areas of corporate activity where they must be dealt with in political, not just normative terms. Whether it is the nation or its food, this is normally dealt with by drawing on existing cultural themes whose value and durability exceeds particular political interests or associations.

The contents of this special issue cover a broad array of topics, problems, and perspectives, many of which extend beyond the immediate parameters of what is normally considered to be public relations in the technical sense. The rationale for this eclecticism is driven by a theoretical argument that treats public relations not as a self-contained, unified field of knowledge and practice, but as an art and science of communication that overlaps with and blurs into other forms of organized and professionalized promotional communication. Viewed this way, PR is a contested and contradictory domain that lacks a unified professional identity or theoretical framework. It is marked by the tension between practitioners who proclaim to value an ethical orientation to their profession and the clients and employers for whom interests, threats, and competitive advantage are often paramount. Rather than see these characteristics as evidence of a fractured field that is still in a process of maturation, we urge the reader to see them as symptoms of a social world in which communication plays an increasingly strategic role in responding to contending and contentious forces of social change.

Note

1. Hiebert argued this point not because he saw public relations to be an inherently benevolent force, but because in increasingly complex and pluralistic societies, professionalized communication enables competing voices to enter into discussion with one another. From the perspective of systems theory, the discussion generated by public relations—even if it is abbreviated, largely symbolic, and tokenistic—is necessary to establishing an environment of organized influence by which solidarity and something approaching the “public will” can be possible (see, for example, Parsons, 1967). Habermas' foundational books on *communicative action* (1981/1984, 1981/1987) offer a forceful critique of the role that structural functionalists like Parsons ascribe to influence in relation to the fundamental problem of social integration in modern societies.

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