



Public relations and community: A persistent covenant

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st Century global public relations professional community, the need for a postmodern reformation is compellingly evident. Most theorizing begins with basic assumptions about the three main social actors for which public relations has been practiced: (1) corporations, (2) nongovernmental and civil society organizations (NGOs and CSOs), and (3) governments. Questions about society itself are rarely examined, but when they do come up, scholars and practitioners tend to assume generally accepted values and mores. Neglected has been a robust criticism of the concepts upon which such paradigms have been built.

The authors argue that earlier paradigms are mostly inadequate in addressing the needs of a 21st Century in which communication technology is creating rapid globalization while it is dangerously exacerbating the tensions of multiculturalism. Through a critical discussion of prior assumptions and paradigms in public relations scholarship, the authors underline the need for public relations to revitalize and bring its body of knowledge into the 21st Century. The authors posit and discuss how the community-building theory originally espoused by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) and modified in subsequent scholarship can provide a viable departure point toward developing new approaches to research about and practice of public relations that can take into account the dynamic environment wrought by changes in communication technology.

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1. Introduction

Perhaps the most significant criticism of 20th Century public relations theories has been their failure to peel back layers of inquiry. Most theorizing begins with basic assumptions about the three main social actors for which public relations has been practiced: (1) corporations, (2) nongovernmental and civil society organizations (NGOs and CSOs), and (3) governments. Questions about society itself are rarely examined, but when they do come up, scholars and practitioners tend to assume generally accepted values and mores. Seldom explored are questions about a theory of society itself, certainly at a global level. Too often, at least in the West, familiar forms of democracy and capitalism are assumed—uncritically—to be superior to other forms of governments and economic systems.

At one time such assumptions may have seemed unquestionably valid. Public relations textbooks proudly acclaimed a linear development of public relations as a discrete area of “progressive” scholarly inquiry and professional practice. Neglected has been a robust criticism of the concepts upon which such paradigms have been built. An example is the notion of the “public,” adapted from sociologists with a heavy debt to John Dewey. Paradigms do not last forever, as noted by

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Kuhn (1970) in his definition of paradigms as “universally recognized scientific achievements that for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners” (p. viii). An increasingly technological, global, and multicultural society may require new paradigmatic thinking.

In an electronically viral age, we must raise questions about certain 20th Century truisms. Does the concept of a mass audience still remain valid and heuristic in terms of effective public relations? Is it possible that competing paradigms representing cultural, historical, and ideological traditions could meld into a grand theory of public relations and a worldwide body of knowledge with global benchmarks of best practices and universal professional ethics? Public relations scholars must be bold in raising and addressing fundamental questions of a global society in which truth and reality are being redefined and in which hierarchies of power are being re-arranged.

This paper puts forth two main tenets: (1) that the community-building theory originally espoused by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) and modified in subsequent scholarship provides a viable departure point toward developing new approaches to research about and practice of public relations; and (2) that, to revitalize and bring public relations into the 21st Century, we must question prior assumptions and devise and explore new paradigms that take into account the dynamic environment wrought by changes in communication technology. To begin, we will revisit community-building theory. Then we will provide a brief overview of the impact of technology and globalism on the concept of “publics” before applying our analysis to an emergent digimodern society and to expanding online communities. The ultimate goal is to stimulate among public relations scholars and practitioners out-of-the-box thinking appropriate for a technologically savvy and global, yet multicultural, world (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001). Our method will be that of a critical essay with an interrogation of relevant literature.

2. Revisiting community-building theory

While acknowledging the need to explore and test new paradigms of public relations worldwide, the authors maintain that the heuristic value of the Kruckeberg and Starck community-building theory (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001) continues to provide a normative theoretical model that is sustainable and useful as a template for further inquiry. Hallahan (2004) described community-building as both a process and an outcome of “the integration of people and the organizations they create into a functional collectivity that strives toward common or compatible goals” (Hallahan, 2004, p. 46). Public relations is seen as strongly anchored in the concept of community. The relevance of community in public relations is evident in the early work of Kruckeberg and Starck (1988). Drawing on the Chicago School of Social Thought, especially the work of John Dewey, they maintained that the United States became nationalized 100 years ago, if not as a community, at least as a society. At that time, the nation had become resegmented, not according to geographic communities, but according to vocational/avocational communities in which time and space were not problematic.

Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) noted that Chicago School scholars were engrossed with the question of loss of community. Ruing this loss, they sought to regain their ideal primarily through the means by which they had perceived community to have been lost to begin with, i.e., communication—specifically the widespread use of mass media, together with easy and cheap long-distance communication among individuals, which altered people’s relationships to one another.

What Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) observed over two decades ago remains by-and-large true, i.e., some public relations texts do make brief use of the ideas of the Chicago School, e.g., the concept of “the public” as conceived by Dewey (1927). However, here also the public relations literature uses the concept of “the public” somewhat differently than did Dewey, who in his *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), defined a public as “a group of individuals who together are affected by a particular action or idea. Thus, each issue or problem creates its own public” (p. 128). In contrast to Dewey’s issue or problem orientation, public relations literature’s orientation is to organization-centric “publics” (plural), i.e., segments of society who have common interests and concerns about an organization and/or who may be affected in a like manner by that organization and, importantly, whose opinions, attitudes, and acts may impact that organization.

Community as a central element describing postmodern societies became the subject of study by other scholars (e.g., Burton, 1998; Hallahan, 2004; Luoma-aho, 2009). The focus tended to be on the role that public relations could play for organizations and for society-at-large. Over the years, community-building theory has been examined in book chapters and articles (e.g., Kruckeberg, 1993; Kruckeberg & Starck, 2004; Kruckeberg et al., 2006). More recently, community-building theory has been developed into an “organic model” of public relations (e.g., Kruckeberg, 2007; Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2010, 2011). An “organic theory” was proffered as the foundation for a normative model of public relations that would be applicable globally, not only for corporations, but also for governments and nongovernmental/civil society organizations (e.g., Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005, 2007; Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2005). The theory and its accompanying normative model were developed in response to the unprecedented social/political/economic/cultural changes that have evolved rapidly in the early years of the 21st Century. In this global society, which reveals little pretense of being a community, the world’s citizens have become fragmented into global tribes, i.e., groups of people throughout the world who share cultures, that can create an environment that may threaten the welfare of citizens and nations alike (Kruckeberg & Tsetsura, 2008; Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010; Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2011). In such a chaotic environment, it is thus paramount that organizations realize that publics cannot be controlled or managed and that organizations are better off when publics are part of a “community” in which organizations are also full-fledged members. Accordingly, public relations’ role becomes one of helping both organizations and publics build a community where dialogue and mutual understanding can take place.

As Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) had proposed in their original community-building theory, Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2011, p. 221) argued that the primary public relations goal “should be to encourage and to promote an understanding of its organizational goals through an interaction with citizens, whose sense of active contribution should be recognized by the organization through implementation and innovation resulting from citizens’ contributions, including the organization’s acts of social responsibility”. Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) identified several ways in which public relations can contribute to the restoration and maintenance of a sense of community. We believe many are valid for this 21st Century global society, including: helping community members and their organizations become conscious of common interests; helping individuals in the community to overcome alienation; helping individuals find security and protection through association with others; actively taking part in community projects promoting progress; and helping foster personal friendships. In the following sections, we will present arguments that will support our thesis about the need to reconceptualize public relations scholarship in a way that embraces a community-building perspective. Specifically, we will discuss how communication technology and the phenomenon of globalization have shaped and altered the concept of “publics” and the implications of this change on the way in which publics interact with organizations and with each other through the use of communication technology.

3. Technology and globalism: “One world now”

That technology and globalism have impacted our lives is irrefutable. Steve Jobs, one of the modern world’s great visionaries, not only saw into the future of communication technology, but contributed mightily toward inventing it. He was also aware of its implications. As he told his biographer, Walter Isaacson (2011, p. 538), “We’re just one world now.”

The concept of “publics” has been altered as a consequence of both technology and globalism. First, technology has made communication faster, less mediated, and more widespread. Communication technology facilitates the process of sharing ideas, concerns, and common interests. It has also empowered people—at least those of the more developed societies—since people have the capacity to “utilize the internet to widen the range of people receiving messages and, ultimately, to increase the power they wield when confronting organizations” (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 176). The English philosopher Alan Kirby (2006, November/December; 2009) refers to this era as “pseudo-modernism,” later called “digimodernism.” A digimodernist society is highly characterized by individuals’ actions and active participation and is mediated by communication technology. It is a society in which the “emergence of new technologies re-structured, violently and forever, the nature of the author, the reader, and the text, and the relationships between them” (Kirby, 2006, November/December). Bruns (2007) extends this idea by claiming that today’s Internet users are more than that, i.e., their increased production ability transforms their role into one of “prod-users” and “co-creators”. Accordingly, cultural products “cannot and do not exist unless the individual intervenes [physically] in them” (Kirby, 2006, November/December). Van Dijck (2009), on the other hand, argues that relationships among individuals, society, and communication technology are “more complex than these bipolar terms suggest” and thus it is necessary to “account for the multifarious roles of users in a media environment where the boundaries between commerce, content, and information are currently being redrawn” (Van Dijck 2009, p. 42). In digimodernist societies, in fact, “publics” are not simply publics, audiences, target groups, stake- or share-holders. Instead, they become active players, often unrecognizable leaders of social interactions and of social construction of reality and meanings around reality.

Furthermore, globalism has also altered the concept of “publics” by altering people’s concerns and common interests. These, in fact, can bypass geographical boundaries, class, status, culture, and religions to become global. For example, climate change is an issue that is perceived to be extremely relevant by different people around the world (HSBC, 2010). In relation to the issue of climate change, it is even possible to talk about society-at-large as “the public.” Dewey (1927), indeed, claimed that only when certain people develop some common interests on an issue does a public come into existence. The formation of a public is, however, a dynamic process, since interests and concerns change rapidly and what is brought to the attention of a mass audience today may not be so relevant tomorrow. Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2012) corroborate this idea of “interest/concern fluctuation” and consequently “public fluctuation” when they say that, in a world inextricably linked, conflicting and confused ideologies may—and have—evolved around different issues. Infinite numbers of “volatile publics” can form quickly and unpredictably with repercussions that are global. Such developments are, indeed, taking global society in directions that are difficult to predict and difficult, if not impossible, to control.

Because “publics” are not anymore simply “publics” as a result of the development of communication technology and the impact of globalization, organizations need to change the way they see their “publics” as well as society-at-large. If publics can be anyone in the world, including those who may not have an obvious or direct relationship with the organization, and if they can affect organizations as well as social systems, then organizations must change their perspective on how to interact with them. Specifically, in a digimodern society, an organization can no longer be centered exclusively on self-interests, but must realize that “it is an organic part of the whole social system of society and thereby whose responsibility to society is greater—with the public relations practitioners’ responsibilities likewise dramatically increased” (Kruckeberg et al., 2006, p. 486). Accordingly, public relations practitioners could help those “publics” and their organizations to become conscious of common interests.

4. Adapting to a digimodern society

At a time when the concept of a “public” has changed and social, political, economic, and cultural developments are affected by the increasing use—and misuse—of communication technology that encourages the ideology of globalized market economies and of self-expression, the concept of “relationship” becomes even more central for 21st Century public relations theory. Not only do people become progressively more involved in the production and consumption of cultural artifacts, but their relationships can be formed and dissolved more quickly, depending on their interests and concerns. Understanding the role of relationships and relationship dynamics can help public relations practitioners navigate in multiple communities, physical and virtual, and to overcome ambiguities and uncertainties (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011) that characterize digimodernist societies. Communication technology has created opportunities and challenges both for organizations and for people, requiring an increased need to reconsider and redefine the dynamics of relationships within organizations and in society-at-large.

Since Ferguson's discussion (1984, August) on relationship as a unifying concept for public relations that distinguishes public relations from other professionalized professions, research has been conducted primarily to theorize the field according to organizational and/or management paradigms. Relationship, therefore, has been viewed in a variety of ways: as a relevant construct for organizations' purposes and directions (see, e.g., Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig et al., 2002); as a strategic management function (see, e.g., Cutlip et al., 1995; Hallahan, 2007); and as a means to define the organizational function of public relations (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) and so forth.

Such paradigms suggest that organizations seek relationships with particular key publics, i.e., publics that are of most importance to them, either to benefit from the position, to influence these primary publics, or to avoid potential conflicts, particularly with activist publics. However, relationships also can form outside of these dynamics. Many brand communities, for example, emerge outside of the control and interest of organizations. For marketing purposes, Cova and Cova (2002) studied the formation and dynamics of what they defined as tribes, i.e., a group of people who share a kinship, emotion, or passion for something and who constitute a collective actor that represents a counter power to institutional power (Cova and Cova, 2002, p. 597). In these tribes, Cova and Cova (2002) identified relationships that are outside of the organization–public paradigm and that could not be managed. Those groups of publics, in fact, show strong communal embeddedness, high levels of affectivity and influence on other people's behaviors, and, at the same time, great resistance to engaging in relationships with companies (Cova & Cova, 2002; Peñaloza & Venkatesh, 2006; Schultz et al., 2005). Cova and Cova (2002) concluded that, in situations in which organizations need/want to cultivate relationships with publics (e.g., with prospective customers who are part of such tribes), organizations can offer situations and occasions in which tribe members can meet and enhance their interpersonal bonds in the hope that these tribe members will reciprocate this effort. Such relationships cannot be managed, at least not according to traditional [marketing] paradigms.

In public relations, we see a similar problem. Most public relations studies (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999, 2000a,b; Cutlip et al., 1995; Ledingham, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) depict relationship as a construct that is initiated by organizations based on the presumed publics' influence on organizational performance and reputation. Such a top-down perspective gives organizations the illusion that they are deciding whether or not to establish a relationship with a particular public as well as to define the form of this relationship and the prerogative to plan strategies and tactics to manage the relationship. This does not appear to be how the process works in the digimodern society. As the Arab Spring and London riots of 2011 have demonstrated, publics form chaotically and create communities and tribes outside of the influence of organizations. In addition, these newly formed publics often dictate the form and rules of relationships with organizations. In Kirby's perspective (2006, November/December; 2009), relationships are the product of people's own creation. In this context, relationships cannot be managed by organizations, but can only be cultivated in such a way that publics perceive relationships with organizations to be relevant for their own purposes. Relationships conceptualized in this manner could form the basis of research leading to different forms of community-building. Implications for practical application should be obvious, literally turning the idea of relationship-building on its head.

5. From organization-centric to public-centric

If the concept of “publics” has changed as a consequence of globalism and technology and if we are correct in assigning to “publics” a predominant role in organization–public relationships, then communication technology alters even the dynamics of these relationships. Increasingly, 21st Century relationships are about online communities, social networks, and other types of online linkages. The latest technological developments will continue to promote this online activity. In such an environment, dialogic relationships are sought more than ever (Kent & Taylor, 1998), but these are difficult to achieve without having a clear and objective idea of the identity of key publics, how “powerful” those publics are, and to what “culture” they belong. As a construct, relationship is greatly affected by the power, identity, trust, and culture of the organization as well as of its key publics. In relationships, power that is the expression of particular knowledge, expertise, position in the organization, money, or charismatic personality is also an important element for relationship-building. Relationships can make people powerful. By knowing other individuals in “powerful positions,” people can acquire power. Relational societies, for example, that are based on social classes and “connections” emphasize the role of personal relationships for career development (Valentini, 2010a). Similarly, powerful people can more easily extend their network of relationships because of their power.

In online communities, powerful individuals are known as “mavens,” i.e., experts (Boster et al., 2011). They are influencers of online conversations and consumers’ decision-making. In a prior incarnation, they were known as opinion leaders.

Power is also an expression of identity. The identity of persons/organizations is extremely relevant for the establishment of relationships with publics. Businesses already understand how to benefit from the identity of persons by engaging celebrities (e.g., Charlie Sheen, Kim Kardashian, Snoop Dogg) to endorse company brands via social media (Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011) or by engaging bloggers to endorse products among their followers with or without disclosing blogger–organization relationships (Kozinets et al., 2010). People engage in relationships with those who they believe have personal, social, or professional connections. The way in which individuals and organizations present their identities is important to understand whether a public sees a connection with the organization/individual, allowing this public to decide whether to pursue a relationship with the subject. In the online environment, however, identity is an artificial “construct of what an [individual] wants to appear, makes people understand about him/herself” (Valentini, 2010b, p. 66). Internet users, thus, may find it difficult to distinguish accurate information about a person’s/organization’s identity from an identity that is simply a created fiction. This has “direct consequences on the level of communicative efficacy of an organization and on relationships among (an) organization’s stakeholders” (Valentini, 2010b, p. 66).

According to Bekmeier–Feuerhahn and Eichenlaub (2010), the extent to which an individual perceives similarity or dissimilarity with another individual influences the development of trust—a fundamental element in building and maintaining relationships of any type. Trust presumes a certain level of commitment by the trustee to fulfill the expectations of others (Gambetta, 1990). Several scholars in organization–public relationships have identified “trust” as one of the most important indicators to assess the type of relationship among organizations and publics (Grunig et al., 1992; Huang, 1997; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). While no common definition of the concept of trust is agreed upon, in organizational settings trust is often understood as a particular company’s behavior, “ethically justifiable” behavior that is based on “morally correct decisions and actions” and on “ethical principles of analysis” (Hosmer, 1995, p. 399). However, in today’s more and more “green-washed society” (Bazillier & Vauday, 2010; Ramus & Montiel, 2005), individuals are becoming increasingly skeptical of the real purposes behind the self-proclaimed socially responsible decisions and actions of organizations. Trust, thereby, takes on a hazy meaning in this multi-layered, hyper-connected, and multi-cultural global world. No longer does trust emerge from a personal encounter with another individual, but it is systemic (Giddens, 1990). In online encounters, trust is difficult to achieve because in social network sites people and organizations can claim to be something they are not. Or they can pursue opaque actions, such as those of some of the bloggers studied by Kozinets and others (2010). These authors (Kozinets et al., 2010) conducted an online ethnography to study bloggers’ role in a word of mouth marketing (WOMM) campaign and discovered that many bloggers who had agreed to promote the product of the company did not disclose their involvement when presenting and discussing the company’s product in their blog community. Whom we trust and why we trust are, thus, questions that are difficult to answer in the online environment.

The 21st Century is a time in which different “truths” may exist and when universal objectivity does not exist. Similarly, relationships form, dissolve, and take different shapes continuously. Studies at the global level point to the relevance of culture in public relations practice, but also show that relationships can take on different forms and be cultivated according to different rules, depending on the culture (see, e.g., Hung, 2003; Neijens & Smit, 2006; Shin & Cameron, 2002). In the online environment, culture takes on an impressionistic quality. It may assume global, local, or even “glocal” forms (Valentini, 2007). Consequently, organizations find it particularly challenging to manage—if this is even realistically possible and desirable—online relationships with publics in different cultures. Even more problematic is the ability to identify the types of relationships—e.g., exchange, communal, covenant-based relationships (Hung, 2005)—that publics of different cultures seek from an organization in the online environment.

While these arguments underline the importance of relationships in digimodern societies, they also show the limitations of current public relations contributions in relationship building. We propose a move away from an organization-centric perspective in handling organization–public relationships to a public-centric perspective. We contend that, in a digimodern global society, community-building theory offers a viable—and perhaps the best—approach in the way public relations scholars conceptualize their research and the way in which public relations professionals practice.

6. Conclusion

To reiterate the salient concern of this paper: Can public relations in the digimodern era be performed by traditionally prepared practitioners using existing bodies of knowledge, skills, and abilities? We do not think so. A digimodern environment involves shifting our traditional thinking of the organization as the centerpiece of what we do and refocusing attention on society, that is, the community in its many manifestations. The fundamental relationship continues to be the nature of the covenant that has been established individually, but also collectively.

While technology will continue to exert an impact on public relations, so will the inexorable trend toward globalization, albeit tempered somewhat by the pull of ethnic and cultural identities. The forces at play urge us to look inward and outward simultaneously, a kind of centripetal pull toward the internal as well as a concomitant centrifugal tug toward the external. As Princeton University Professor Appiah put it: the challenge is to equip people who are being brought up in a local orientation “with ideas and institutions that will allow us to live together as the global tribe we have become” (Appiah, 2006, p. xiii). Historically, the situation may seem familiar. And it is. Yet it is also different in how we deal with the continuing challenge of changing circumstances.

If, as we argue that 20th Century public relations scholarship and practice are inadequate to meet the challenges of the new era, the outlook for public relations scholars may be similar to Samuel Johnson's observation about a man facing hanging: "it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Paradigmatic thinking is not for the fainthearted; there's always the possibility of being wrong. But, as Kuhn (p. 64) warns, professionalization can restrict vision and lead to resisting fundamental change. Awareness of change and ability to adapt are critical to surviving and taking advantage of opportunities in a changing environment. In our view, a guiding principle is the manner in which we understand the role of public relations. Perhaps this notion cannot be expressed more directly or succinctly than in the original formulation of the community-building thesis of Kruckeberg and Starck (1988): Public relations is "the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community." We now add: "including in the online environment."

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