

## **PR Theory And Education In The Age Of Globalization\***

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PR as a field of study has made great strides in the past three decades. In terms of education offerings, programs in PR have multiplied both in the United States, the country where the field traces its academic origins and its major developments, and in the rest of the world. Institutionally speaking, PR academic programs are housed either in Departments/Schools of Business or in Departments/Schools of Communication. In some cases, PR programs have their own independent standing as department units within the university structure but this is more the exception than the rule. As the field develops and matures and acquires legitimacy both in the academy and in society at large, one would expect more departments of independent standing to be created. The net gains to be realized from such an optimistic scenario are easy to imagine: more faculty positions will be created, there will be increases in the amount and quality of the research output as well as increases in the number of graduates seeking employment as PR professionals. To move towards this direction, academics working in the field must face up to the double challenge of confronting the negative connotations that PR evokes to the popular mind and of demonstrating relevance in addressing societal problems and issues that are increasingly global in scope. In this paper, I address this two-tier challenge by proposing that PR academics: a) critically examine the dominant theoretical contributions in the field in light of new configurations and dimensions which the globalization process has unleashed and b) seriously engage in theory development that enriches our understanding of the term “public” in PR. If we were to follow along this path, we would end up substituting societal-based perspectives to the prevalent organization-based understandings of PR. Such perspectives, parallel to the macromarketing perspective in marketing and to calls for re-engagement of management literature with the social sciences, would locate PR in its wider social, economic, political and historical context. Andrew Pettigrew’s remarks of management research with its preoccupation for relevance to its users hold true also for public relations, another field of applied knowledge: ‘A more contextualist and dynamic view of knowing will open doors to all the other potential

stakeholders of management research. To do this, we will need to re-engage and deepen our links with the social sciences and users'.<sup>1</sup>

In a major empirical study, a team of researchers investigated the state of theory works in Public Relations.<sup>2</sup> They analyzed 748 scholarly articles from 1975 up until 2000. In the theory development category, most studies dealt with the work of J. Grunig and his colleagues, that is, the four models of PR and the Excellence Study, undertaken on behalf of the International Association of Business Communicators. The second concern of theorists was in the area of public relationships, confirming the finding of the 1984 empirical study by Ferguson that researchers would be better off in developing theory by concentrating on relationships rather than on other entities like organization or the public. Among the top theorists in PR, the study mentioned James and Larissa Grunig for their work on the Excellence Study, Robert Heath for his work on issues management, John Ledingham for his work on relationship management and Timothy Coombs for his work on crisis management. A second study assessing the state of the field arrives at similar conclusions, taking a more conceptual angle in reviewing theoretical contributions to the field.<sup>3</sup> For Botan and Taylor as well, Grunig's symmetrical/excellence theory and the works on relationship organizations and publics but endows the latter with the quality of being actively involved in the production of meanings. Issues management, also occupies a prominent place in the review article as a model of applied communication whose reach can extend beyond the field of PR to other specialties of communication.

Both the empirical and the conceptual review articles of the field converge in identifying Grunig's symmetrical model, relationship management and issues management as the most important and promising areas of research for theoretical elaboration. All three theoretical frameworks share in common a preoccupation with management. In fact, all three define public relations as the management of relationships between organizations and their publics. The theoretical building blocs of these perspectives are made up of a management discourse that accords prominence to terms like "strategy", "organizational goals" and "dominant coalitions", and is ordered along the four stages of the strategic management process: analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. The management discourse embedded in the theoretical perspectives is oriented toward the production of instrumental knowledge, purporting to "control" and solve problems in the social system. Moreover, all three perspectives ascribe to a positivist epistemology, separating theoretical concepts from empirical reality (subject-object distinction) and aim at arriving at objective knowledge that is empirically falsifiable. In addition, the values that the management discourse privileges are those of efficiency, individualism, order and stability. Last, but not least, all three formulations are imbued with a managerialist understanding of management. A view of management, that a) entails the application of

technical solutions to social, political and value-laden problems, b) privileges managers' views above that of other groups, c) skews away from using concepts discomfoting to managers like power and class and d) advances knowledge claims to be put in the service of the powerful, that is, the managers.<sup>4</sup> In this respect all three PR theoretical perspectives speak to the concerns and share the same values as the agents of "globalization from above", that is, state authorities and corporations. A crucial question is whether these perspectives are well suited to comprehend the processes of a complex globalized world and give also voice to the powerless and marginalized.

A number of prominent sociologists (U. Beck, A. Giddens) have been subjecting our Enlightenment-induced ways of knowing and acting to serious questioning. For German sociologist Ulrich Beck a transformation, implicating modernization, industrialization and globalization processes, has moved societies to a new stage, from simple modern societies to societies of "reflexive modernization".<sup>5</sup> A number of consequences arise from this transition, to be conceived not in evolutionary terms but as an historical discontinuity. First, globalization has shattered the boundaries of the nation-state, blurred the distinctions between global/national/local, public/private, employment/other forms of activity and domestic/foreign and has undermined the notion of seeking the good life and conducting politics within the confines of society understood as nation-state. Second, the monopoly of political power held by governments of states has been broken and in the world society power is distributed and shared among national governments, international organizations, multinational enterprises and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>6</sup> Third, the certainty which characterized simple modern societies has been eroded and so has the faith in progress and in the work of expert scientists. Rational solutions have not been able to foresee unintended and uncontrollable new consequences and risks. Reflexive modernization casts doubts on the idea of linear progress and on science's potential to solve problems and control their side effects. Social science can no longer aspire to instrumental reason and control over nature. Instead, the task of social science must be to describe and understand the new rules of the social game as social actors are redefining their identities and roles in a new society, a new capitalism, a new cosmopolitan global order. Fourth, a clear-cut division between nature and society cannot be maintained and a pluralization of natural definitions must take its place. Fifth, the old categories of class, gender, family etc. have lost much of their salience and individualization has gained in significance. The stable and unchangeable subject of the first modernity is replaced by the reflexive modern subject, which is mobile, makes quick decisions, engages in deals, constructs alliances and participates in networks. Beck considers processes of individualization essential to his reflexive modernization perspective. Individualization entails

disembedding of the ways of simple modernity and the reinvention of new biographies.

Following Beck's analysis, the dominant assumptions, concepts and frameworks of PR theory must be re-conceptualized if the field of public relations were to take seriously the challenge posed by globalization in an attempt to understand societies at the stage of reflexive modernization. A number of unexplored areas become foci of a new research project: What does "public" mean under conditions of individualization and globalization? How are the "private-public" distinctions drawn in societies of reflexive modernization? How are concepts of "corporation", "organization" transformed by the globalization? What is the role of politics in transnational conflicts over global risks like the mad cow disease, which are determined by uncertainties and doubts in knowing? Under what conditions ethics or aesthetics determine the actions of the reflexive subject? How can the notion of citizen, with its emphasis on dialogue, rights, responsibility and obligations be reconciled with the idea of a consumer eager to satisfy hedonistic desires? To what extent consumerism is politicized under conditions of risk and globalization? How does activism impact subject positions and relationships in public? How are publics constructed through discourses of the public spheres and agents of civil society? What spaces are formed for public dialogue and which concepts, and practices become contested on the local/national/global scene? To answer these and other questions, the field of PR must attend to the work of other social theorists who have been trying to imbue public spheres with a normative dimension and a strong emphasis on political contestation.

A reformulation of PR theory and practice calls for abandoning the management metaphor with its emphasis on instrumental reason and privileging the notion of the public sphere with its emphasis on deliberation, contestation and argumentation. Habermas and his followers conceive the public sphere as a communicatively generated space, a space where multiple competing voices are heard. The emphasis on the public sphere springs from the realization that PR is concerned with issues and values that become publicly relevant. In the PR field, Inger Jensen, Shirley Leitch and David Neilson are attempting to provide a more sophisticated understanding of "public" and the public sphere drawing from and extending the work of Jurgen Habermas on the subject.<sup>7</sup> In particular, Leitch and Neilson draw upon Habermas's system-lifeworld distinction to designate organizations as system organizations, lifeworld organizations and organizations with mixed characteristics as well as to posit the various orientations and strategies that publics adopt towards these organizations. It is important to note that publics resemble Beck's reflexive subjects that may be organized within an institutional structure or lie dispersed. In this publicly informed articulation, public relations centers upon "the many ways in which different types of publics interact

with different types of organizations, and vice versa, on a strategic terrain of competing discourses and unequal access to power and resources.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, this line of research articulates a new public democratically derived discourse and forges connections between PR scholarship and the work of political theorists and sociologists (Stevenson, 2002) on different forms of citizenship (ecological, cosmopolitan, etc) under conditions of globalization.<sup>9</sup> One may therefore point in the direction of realigning public relations scholarly work with re-articulations of democracy, especially of its cosmopolitan variant. Finally, this line of research shares with the reflective dimension of European public relations a concern with values and with critical perspectives a preoccupation with the power/knowledge nexus and power<sup>10</sup> differentials in society. This sociological-informed understanding of PR is to be found in the degree programs of PR offered by the Universitat Leipzig in Germany and Roskilde University in Denmark. One would expect other universities, in Europe and elsewhere, to realize that by encompassing sociological insights PR educators can face up to the challenge of globalization.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Pettigrew, "Management Research After Modernism," *British Journal of Management* 12 (2001): S69.

<sup>2</sup> Lynne Sallot M, Lisa J Lyon, Carolina Acosta-Alzuru and Karyn Jones Ogata, "From Aardvark to Zebra: A New Millennium Analysis of Theory Development in Public Relations Academic Journals," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 15 (2003): 43-49.

<sup>3</sup> Carl Botan and Maureen Taylor, "Public Relations: State of the Field," *Journal of Communication* 54 (2004): 645-661.

<sup>4</sup> Tony J. Watson, "Beyond Managism: Negotiated Narratives and Critical Management Education in Practice," *British Journal of Management* 12 (2001): 386-387.

<sup>5</sup> Ulrich Beck, Wolfgang Bonss and Christoph Lau, "The Theory of Reflexive Modernization," *Theory, Culture & Society* 20 (2003): 1-33.

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<sup>6</sup> Dirk Matten, *The Impact of the Risk Society Thesis on Environmental Politics and Management in a Globalising Economy. Principles, Proficiency, Perspectives.* (Swansea, UK: European Business Management School, 2001, accessed 2 May 2005); available from swan: <http://www.swan.ac.uk/ebms/research/>; Internet.

<sup>7</sup> Inger Jensen, "Public Relations and the Public Sphere in the Future," in *7<sup>th</sup> International Public Relations Research Symposium. Public Relations, Public Affairs and Corporate Communications in the New Millennium: the Future*, ed. by Dejan Vercic, Jon White and Danny Moss (Bled, Slovenia: Pristop Communications, 2000), 64-71 ; Shirley Leitch, David Neilson, "Bringing Publics Into Public Relations. New Theoretical Frameworks for Practice," in *Handbook of Public Relations*, ed. by Robert L. Heath (Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 127-138.

<sup>8</sup> Leitch and Neilson, 134.

<sup>9</sup> Nick Stevenson, "Consumer Culture, Ecology and the Possibility of Cosmopolitan Citizenship," *Consumption, Markets and Culture* 5 (2002): 305-319.

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### **Abstract**

#### PR Theory and Education in the Age of Globalization

The purpose of this study is to critically assess the value of theoretical contributions in Public Relations. The dominant view in PR stresses the management aspect of communication. The management emphasis is evident in the major works of theorists like J Grunig,( the Excellence Study) J. Ledingham (relationship management) and R Heath (issues management). It is also prevalent in graduate and undergraduate programs with course offerings like crisis management, campaign management, issues management etc. The managerial view of PR privileges private business entities as the main actors/clients, is guided by technical-instrumental rationality and promotes a capitalist ethos of efficiency, competition, individualism, and profitability. An alternative conception, the continental view of PR, informed by a social-science, sociological understanding, situates PR in the public sphere (I. Jensen, S. Holmstrom, G. Bentele) in an attempt to understand why and how different voices are heard in public and others are silenced. The paper argues that the continental view is better able to cope with the fast-pace current state of modernization (reflexive modernization in U. Beck's terms).

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Keywords: public relations, management, public sphere, globalization, reflexive modernization

**CV**

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