

## Relationships and dialogue in public relations: Foundations of effective public relations?

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This special edition centred on two key topics in public relations: relationships and dialogue. Both are distinct areas of exploration and discussion, and yet neither is independent of the other. Regardless of how one might define or describe them, relationships cannot exist without some form of dialogue. Equally, the latter cannot happen without some type of connection. A key question that is not often asked is whether dialogue is the antecedent for relationships or vice versa. Perhaps it is a case of the chicken or egg syndrome; which comes first, and which should be the focus of public relations practice?

Scholars generally agree that organisation? public relationships are essential but there has been an underlying assumption that there is a common understanding of what such relationships comprise. Dialogue, trust, transparency and authenticity have all been touted as fundamentals to relationship? building, but what is understood by these concepts and how are they operationalised?

In an attempt to scratch beyond the surface and uncover the core principles that encompass dialogue and relationship? building, this special issue serves as a foundation for future researchers to provide a richer understanding of the integral role of public relations in organisation? public relationships. Its purpose is to advance the field and, by following an interdisciplinary approach, build a stronger bridge between public relations research and practice. Taken individually, each article in this special edition tells a unique story; together they form a mosaic of interconnecting ideas, identifying areas of common concern and potential areas for research and contemplation.

**Damion Waymer and Robert L. Heath** open the discussion with their commentary *Organisational legitimacy: The overlooked yet all? important foundation of OPR research*, arguing that legitimacy underpins organisation? public relationships. It is, they believe, operationalised by acknowledging the other partys concerns as valid. Such validation is, of course, implicit in the process of dialogue. But Waymer and Heath perceive corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a strategy to gain, if not enhance, legitimacy in this organisation? public relationship by demonstrating that the organisation wants, and is able, to fulfil societys expectations. Dialogue here is used to determine what these expectations might be, from where they originate, and how they might be met.

Corporate social responsibility and the legitimacy of the relationship is an underlying theme in many of the articles for this special edition. Also recurring are the values, unspoken expectations and ideologies that underlie notions of organisation? public relationships and dialogue, such as diversity, spirituality, and power. These notions and ideologies frame an organisations relationship with its publics and have an impact on how that relationship is understood and enacted.

Using Obamas campaign speeches as a metaphor, **Teresa Mastin** addresses the importance of diversity within relationships in her article *Diversity lessons from the Obama 2008 presidential campaign*. She suggests that for strong relationships to develop, organisations must acknowledge and embrace diversity. Her work emphasises that the individual and the collective cannot be separated; the one makes the other possible. Following a qualitative and an interdisciplinary approach, she draws parallels between Obamas unifying speeches and the creation of inclusivity in the public relations industry. Her findings resonate with an industry that is struggling to find a balance between genders and the representation of social realities. Mastin maintains that if genuine diversity in relationships is to take root, there must be an acknowledgement of and reward for differences and similarities.

While Mastins work focuses on external publics, **Nance McCowns** article *Building leader? employee dialogue and relationships through internal public relations, leadership style, and workplace spirituality* addresses internal publics because, too often, we associate organisation? public relationships solely with external publics, and ignore the value of internal publics in such relationships. Using a qualitative case study with a three? pronged iterative approach comprising in? depth interviews, observation, and document analysis, McCown shows that spiritual leadership can have a significant impact on internal communication and job satisfaction. Her findings lead her to suggest that open, two? way symmetrical communication and workplace spirituality promote the maintenance of a people? focused culture, positive interpersonal communication and general strategies for employee empowerment. She concludes that the leaders vision and faith drives organisation? public relationships, and subsequently proposes a new model for building internal relationships.

**Timothy Penning** takes a different approach in his article *The influence of public relations on relationship content: A content analysis of community foundation annual reports*. He investigates how organisation? public

relationships are expressed as a value in community foundations annual reports. Through quantitative content analysis he shows that the depth and nature of how much the organisation values relationships is revealed in traditional communication media and not only social media. Penning argues that accredited public relations practitioners, who have a better understanding of their role and the industry, are likely to emphasise relationships. Although not explicitly expressed, his findings acknowledge the role of power relationships in the organisation and the impact these relationships have on the enactment of public relations.

In her article *Organisational narratives shaping practitioners use of social media*, **Sharon Schoenmaker** relate to each other. Nevertheless, she acknowledges the value of sharing and conversing, but cautions that 'conversing does not mean 'dialogue, and points out that none of the conversations she studied embodied the principles of dialogue. She suggests that genuine dialogue is not taking place and concludes that in order to truly appreciate social medias role in creating and building relationships, it is important that scholars must explore what it means to 'relate.

**Michel M. Haigh** comes to a similar conclusion in her article *Comparing how organisations use websites and social media to maintain organisation? public relationships*, **Moonhee Cho and Maria De Moya** in their article *Understanding publics engagement with non? profit organisations through Facebook: A typology of messages and motivations behind public? initiated conversations* highlight that despite either party being able to initiate dialogue, the focus remains on the organisations role in engaging publics. Not enough is known about *why* publics engage the organisation, and, while the most common 'strategy is to have an online presence, that is simply not good enough. Practitioners must have a better understanding of publics motivation for engaging in conversations and using social media so they can provide appropriate information, build stronger relationships, and identify the type of skills they need to enact their roles. Upon conducting a thematic analysis of comments left by Facebook users of two charitable organisations, Cho and De Moya identified seven categories that publics employ to initiate conversations: enquiries, requests, experience, grievance, advocacy, advisory and self? promotion. They conclude that publics use the organisations social media site to engage each other and consequently the site becomes a meeting *venue* rather than a communication *medium*. It is evident from Cho and De Moyas study that organisations are not obliged to engage, but should they do so, they must recognise that the site has become a place for discussion in which they are a *participant*.

Similar to Cho and De Moya but following a different framework for analysis, **Nancy Wiencek** investigates charitable organisations online presence. In her article *Raising money on the Web: Relationship? building features that contribute to non? profit fundraising success* she argues for fundraising as an area of public relations specialisation. Through her research she shows the impact of organisation? public (donor) relationships, and specifically the presence of dialogic features on how much money is raised. Coding for traditional dialogic features such as the generation of return visits, ease of interface, and the presence of a dialogic loop, she concludes that there were significant statistical differences in the presence of such features on non? profit, charitable organisations' websites. The more dialogic features, the more funds were raised. Based on her findings, she proposes a new framework for studying donor stewardship on the Web comprising *three* dialogic clusters instead of two: a technical and design cluster, a relationship? building cluster, and a stewardship cluster.

In his article, **Gary Mersham** returns to classical communication philosophy, drawing linkages between age? old thinking around dialogue and rhetoric, and contemporary applications. He points towards the numerous difficulties in assuming that public relations can be truly dialogic, and reiterates the problematic view that a company can indeed enter into a relationship with individuals or publics, thus implicitly querying the legitimacy of such a relationship in the first place. Warning that [a]mbitious expectations about dialogue may blind us to the more subtle richness and effectiveness of one? way communication, he points towards the hard reality that although Bubers view of dialogue suggests that practitioners must give up control, it is something a communication manager is unlikely to do. He concludes that beyond excellent scholarship, there is very little that assists public relations practitioners in how the ideal of dialogue might be enacted in practice and, contesting taken? for? granted thinking in public relations scholarship, reminds the reader that the dissemination of information has an important role to play.

In a similar vein and drawing from social linguistics, computer? mediated communication and public relations, **Kane Hopkins** takes this view a step further in his article *The phatic nature of the online social sphere: Implications for public relations*<sup>st</sup> century to be authentic and to have authentic relationships, then a relationship necessitates a range of communication, including dialogue, dissemination of information and phatic communication. It is evident from the contributions, however, that dialogue and engagement, or lack thereof, are areas that need to be explored further, and integrating qualitative methods to understand the 'whys behind the quantitative data will increase our levels of understanding.

Regardless of the tools, tactics and media used, *more* needs to be known about how dialogue within relationships might be perceived and constructed. While variations exist as to what constitutes 'dialogue, the diverse studies show that most organisations are not appropriately tapping into the dialogic or relationship? building potential offered by, for example, social media. Public relations scholars and practitioners should neither

take the role of dialogue for granted nor assume *where* and *how* it must be enacted. Not only is more research needed to determine what this dialogue might look like or where it may be best used, but *more* robust debate is needed to uncover multifarious ideologies and paradigms that colour our perspectives of public relations, relationships, and dialogue.

## Acknowledgments

The editors of this special edition would like to thank the reviewers who gave up their valuable time to review submissions and provide feedback, the many scholars who submitted their work, and the contributors who remained on board throughout the process. They would also like to thank *Prism Journal* for awarding the George Hines Memorial Prize for this editions call for papers as well as the Journal's editor, Dr Elspeth Tilley, and the editorial staff for their professionalism and support throughout.

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