

Things that don't go together? Considering fandom and re-thinking public relations

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As Big Bird, a staple character of Sesame Street, pondered four bowls of bird seed of varying sizes, he sang the classic line One of these things is not like the other. Sometimes differences and similarities are readily discernible, but it is the researchers duty to examine and test data and concepts that are paired with each other. As we prepared our proposal and after we distributed the call for papers, we received feedback that in sum asked, How do these two things--public relations and fandom--go together?

Defining public relations and fandom *Relevance for Public Relations Practice*

This topic--the theoretical integration of fandom and public relations--has much relevance for practitioners who find themselves operating in a merged and chaotic communication ecosystem. Luoma-aho (2015) wrote, that (e)ngaging stakeholders is not a simple task in the information rich environment, and can be compared to a pinball match; organizational messages now have direct access, but often bounce randomly around in the online environment (p. 2). The cannibalisation of communication areas into strategic communication and integrated communication suggest the merger of advertising, public relations, marketing, and content strategy. In fact, Hallahan et al. (2007) conceptualised and defined strategic communication because the activities of all these functions are crafted with intent and direction that benefit the organisations goals, cut through the cacophony of messages (p. 27), and produce mutual understanding among all of the involved actors.

For example, online community management of fans and critics is a relatively new method practitioners use to engage stakeholders and public. Although there has been some work on offline community management (or brand communities), primarily in fields outside of public relations, there is not much available for online communities. The work that has been done has been focused on marketing or cultural studies. In leading public relations and strategic communication journals, research on fans is rare or based on a limited conceptualisation of fans and their role in the relationship. The attempt to connect fandom research to segmentation and other public relations theory is nonexistent.

Relevance to Public Relations Theory

Another example of this is the idea of engaged publics or audiences. This idea of an extremely engaged public has arisen in multiple fields, including audience studies, media studies, sport culture, participatory culture, marketing, cultural studies, and public relations. The conceptions of the public in previous models are no longer valid across all campaigns. With the advent of social media, content producers and audiences can be one and the same. Fans have more ownership on a global scale, without the limitations of physical proximity, yet our current conceptions of public do not delineate between active and super-active publics, let alone discuss engagement with information beyond processing and seeking it or dealing with publics virtually who are highly motivated to communicate with organisations and brands. In professional public relations settings, there is a huge shift in focus to online community management. Yet, there is little knowledge about the publics who are interacting within the community; this is a place where this special issue can provide significant insight.

Interdisciplinary Implications for this Special Issue

Public relations theorists have discussed how siloed or compartmentalised public relations is as a field. Hallahan et al. (2007) wrote in their manifesto to position strategic communication as a valued term in the field, Research can be informed by looking beyond the bounds of traditional communication disciplines (p. 28). Botan and Hazelton (2006) optimistically stated that future public relations work would appear in a myriad of journals; this is true. Public relations research can be found in the top communication journals, yet stretching into other disciplines or even into the niche crevices of the communication disciplines is not evident (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2011). Still, Brooms (2006) comment that the insularity of field echoes: We have traditionally cited publications from communication, journalism, marketing and other social sciences, but do not see our publications cited by scholars in other fields (p. 149). For the interdisciplinary trajectory of public relations as an academic discipline as well as an applied field, scholars and practitioners cannot look to marketing as the only place of research solace with which we share common ground. Scholars have to look to other areas for inspiration, trends, and theory.

To connect public relations and fandom together, we argue that the common goals of brands and fans are not at odds. Fans want ethical and respectful communication, as well as acknowledgment and validation from the brand; the entity--be it a corporation, a brand, or media platform/project--wants loyalty, allegiance, and feedback

via a two-way communication process that aids the growth of the relationship. The purpose of this special issue is to integrate stakeholder and publics theories with those of participatory cultures and media studies/fan perspectives; to add new, fresh insight into the public relations disciplines concepts of publics and segmentation; and to apply new research and understandings of publics. Bringing these two areas together is a natural expansion of the aims of relationship management (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Conclusion

Fandom and participatory culture have been identified, discussed, and lamented in these areas and in various global contexts, and these conversations are synonymous and parallel with the ideas outlined in the segmentation strategies and the robust research on the situational theory of publics. For years, these two bodies of knowledge developed and became enriched in their own ecosystems of scholars and thought. Many of the ideas present in each ecosystem are shared by the other yet were never explored or mined by other areas. Our effort here is to put the recent discussions in fan studies and public relations in conversation with each other, and we believe the pieces in this volume will do that. From our perspective, it was easy to pull connections between fandom, the study of fans and their relationships with created texts and brands and the practice of public relations, the organisational function that works to forge and strengthen the tensile bonds between an organisational brand and its publics through communicative efforts.

The works assembled in this special issue touch on a range of topics and ideas. Melissa Dodd and William Kinnally apply an interdisciplinary approach to develop a conceptualisation about fans. Damion Waymer, Sarah H. VanSlette, and Kendall Cherry examine the devolution and evolution of Miley Cyrus, who shed her squeaky clean Disney image with a wrecking ball and outrageous behaviour, and how her fan public reacted and adapted to her new image. Heidi Edwards explores the loved-or-loathed U.S. cable show *Sex and the City*, its arc on breast cancer, and discussion of breast cancer on the shows fan forums. Fan response to health messages embedded in entertainment provides a wealth of observations and meaning-making insights to health communicators creating messages for particular segmented publics. Kathleen Stansberry proposes a new model to identify and engage online influencers by examining the information flows in online social networks and classifying who collects, curates, and distributes the information. In a case study that pulls apart the Twitter conflict between two corporations, Nneka Logan argues that the participatory culture and nature of social media allow for customers to rejoice, engage, and vent to brands and offer rhetorical strategies for dealing with such issues. Justin Walden and Richard Waters examine the cultivation of fans through online social media activities; they chart fan engagement and participation through the major league franchises Facebook pages. The commentary piece by Kathleen Stansberry and Jessalynn Strauss interrogates the idea of brand personalities through the social media efforts of Las Vegas casinos; the authors found that such personalities are another way to engage interested publics who can become brand fans. We hope that these articles show that these two bodies of knowledge--fandom and public relations--offer unique perspectives on participatory culture, social community, and communication management.