
Commentary: Publics, Dialogism, and Advocacy: Notes towards a reconceptualisation of public relations in the United States

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Abstract:

In the United States, history suggests we have made many errors in the practice of public relations. We now face a conflicted and often negative professional reputation. This commentary essay asks whether a paradigm shift that offers a new conceptualisation of public relations might be possible from weaving together Gerard Hauser's theory of publics, Marvin Olasky's advocacy public relations model, and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism. At present, this work is in its early stages, and is exploratory and conceptual in nature. The author welcomes contact from others working in similar research fields who may have feedback on this commentary piece.

Introduction

The practice of public relations in United States history has been woven in deceit, superficiality, and distrust, resulting in significant reputation problems for the profession (Cutlip, 1995). Media and popular culture representations have depicted the practice of public relations as producing suspicion, fear, and antipathy (Grunig, 2000). Typically, public opinion surveys on honesty and ethics reveal that journalists, advertising personnel, and public relations practitioners score at the bottom of those surveys, supporting the notion of a public sense of mistrust (Bowen & Heath, 2006). Some of this mistrust can be linked to historical incidences of public relations practitioners attempting to lead what they believe to be mindless spectators to a particular end constructed by and for the purpose of those few leading (Cutlip, 1995). While the practice of public relations can certainly be used to

control human beings rather than to stimulate exchange or communicate ideas, this essay seeks to rethink the practice of public relations in a way that might go some way towards repairing its negative reputation.

In the United States there are many different definitions of public relations, ranging from a limited perspective that suggests it is merely an information function, to a broader understanding that includes public relations as an umbrella term for a myriad of communicative needs, such as community relations, consumer affairs, speech writing, issues management, and customer relations (Marconi, 2004). For others, the practice of public relations is more about power, control, and influence over other human beings (e.g. Dilenschneider, 1991). For the purpose of this essay, the practice of public relations refers to communicative action in the broadest sense; public relations is understood as an information function in itself, but with the potential for power, control, manipulation, and persuasion. Because the practice of public relations in the United States has a chequered history, many people have become sceptical about what is offered as 'truth' and about the messages that emerge. Ways to practice public relations that can repair negative misconceptions or actual faulty practices need to be considered.

This essay offers a way to reconceptualise the practice of US public relations by moving from the monologic practice that Edward Bernays (2004/1923) initially endorsed, towards a dialogic practice more akin to Grunig's (1989) two-way symmetrical format. The shift is elaborated using the ideas of Hauser, Olasky, and Bakhtin. Following this reconceptualisation, instead of asking how one action might be rhetorically imposed upon another, the practitioner asks *who* has a voice in

public relations, *what* we can do to make the practice of public relations ethically better, and *how* this new way would actually happen. This set of questions allows the practitioner to use theoretically and philosophically grounded theories from multiple perspectives.

A Dialogic Encounter

Gerard Hauser (1999) argues that publics are emergences that respond to the historical moment. He distinguishes publics from a mass public, in that a mass public is characterised by disinterest, as opposed to specific publics which comprise members who are interested in common issues. Publics have greater specificity than the general populace and form a collectivity for particular issues. However, Hauser (1997) does not argue for consensus as a ruling norm, rather he argues that openness, not consensus, should be a ruling norm of publics, because openness allows dissent to enter into the dialogue. Publics attend to discursive processes via a variety of engaging opinions about a particular subject and they come together out of that common interest. Hauser argues that the key to understanding publics is not to look for *a* public but to see a montage of publics emerge in response to a particular issue. Publics appear where there is a common interest but not necessarily a shared opinion. Issues, it is then argued, change and transform as they are encountered in publics; they cannot remain static because they emerge through discursive practices. Reconceptualising publics in this way shifts *who* is targeted with public relations; it also has implications for *how* they are communicated with.

In Hauser's model there is a requirement for openness to the set of conditions that will produce a plurality of spheres within a public sphere, which he refers to as a reticulate public sphere. A reticulate public comes together when people have a shared interest with or without an agreement. The issue is the heart of that reticulate sphere. In a reticulate public, various approaches come together as a result of the common issue and people deliberate to reach a particular and spontaneous result. Deliberation is built upon the utterance, which is

not only a basic linguistic unit but a real responsive interactive unit (Shotter, 2000). Utterances are situated in *distances* or gaps and it is the bridging of these *distances* that requires an answer, regardless of the differences between positions. Shotter (2000) argues that it is in this bridging that everything of ethical, rhetorical, and political importance occurs.

The reticulate public sphere allows for these emergences of publics and this in itself supplants disinterestedness. In addition, rather than a typical assent to an issue, there is a recognition that we engage in this civic conversation on issues as interlocutors and audiences, with a particular interest in the topic. The reticulate nature of publics recognises interdependence and diversity, which allows for an understanding without calling for a universality.

According to Hauser (1999), public spheres are nestled in the domain of particularised arenas or multiple spheres by participants who adhere to reasonableness or standards reflected in vernacular language of conversational communication. Interests are discovered, points of convergence and divergence are identified, and publics allow interlocutors to see how they might accommodate difference. Hauser's theory of publics complements Marvin Olasky's advocacy model of public relations, which highlights the social relationship necessary for an ethical framework of practice.

The advocacy model of public relations proposed by Olasky is situated within classical rhetoric and public address. It can be seen as an ethical turning toward the Other, which does not promote deception but rather a realistic openness in motive. According to Olasky, "With courtesy but firmness, public relations managers should learn to tell overly-demanding fundraisers, reporters, or politicians, 'None of your business' (1987, p. 151). While this may cause initial resentment, if practitioners remain faithful to the truth, at the same time providing necessary information as to the reasons for their maintenance of privacy in some circumstances, people will realise they are receiving the truth. The advocacy model suggests that full transparency may not be a practical goal, because realistically some information should

be public and other information should be private (Olasky, 1987).

Marvin Olasky's advocacy approach differs from earlier models based on a negative propaganda slant, in which information is deliberately presented selectively in order to manipulate, because in this model there is no question as to motive. Olasky argues that public relations practitioners should not claim to be objective but should openly say what their position and loyalty is, and thereby maintain a more honest approach with publics. For such an advocacy model to work within Hauser's rhetorical vernacular model of publics, Bakhtin's dialogism may help implement advocacy and maintain faith with claims of honesty.

The central focus of Mikhail Bakhtin's rhetorical theory is dialogism, which focuses on the interrelatedness of self and Other. Dialogism implies heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981), that is, a polyphony of voices engaged in a constant interaction of meanings that can influence or impact on other voices (Bakhtin, 1981). Within public relations, the potential to influence others suggests a dialogical imperative, so that there is no room for monological discourse. In this understanding of Bakhtin's theory, each dialogue occurs against a backdrop of a third party, invisible and standing above the physical participants. This third party is perhaps understood in a concrete sense as representing god, absolute truth, judgement by dispassionate human conscience, the people, the judgement of history or science, or Hauser's 'reasonableness', as to the validity of utterances in a dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 92) This third party, the superaddressee, is thus a constitutive aspect of the whole utterance (Bakhtin, 1986).

In this polyphony of voices, Hauser's reticulate publics can be understood as engaged by three aspects of Bakhtin's rhetorical theory when employed in advocacy: consummation, answerability, and architectonics. Shaping into a whole, or consummation, can be used to explain how advocacy works within reticulate publics. Consummation occurs when the discussion allows for an ebb and flow of ideas to take place; through the rhetorical action of dialogism comes a consummation that invites

answerability between communicators. Consummation must occur to create a reticulate public; indeed consummation can be identified as the key characteristic of the reticulate public itself. The reticulate public only occurs when there is a myriad of voices with a common ground yet a variety of points of view.

Answerability is the ethical responsibility to the other voices, uniting the wholeness of consummation (Bakhtin, 1990, 1993). It provokes or stimulates a non-alienation as it unites voices in mutual liability and blame, as well as understanding. This unity of answerability exists in each of Hauser's publics where there is an organic ethic that presupposes the voices are acknowledging each other. This acknowledgment is a crucial step in the creation and maintenance of publics, that is, their architectonics.

Architectonics is concerned with questions of the building of things or how they are put together. So, for Hauser, architectonics is what makes the emergences happen as the utterances shape and reshape the public itself. According to Shotter (2000), "without participants' collectivity and reciprocity in responding to each other, nothing would happen" (p. 123). Through the architectonics of answerability, the subsequent steps of deliberation and reasoning can happen.

Synthesis

This reconceptualisation of the role of public relations advocacy requires firstly that the process of publics forming be viewed (and be allowed to proceed) as an organic emergence of dialectic resulting from interested people from a variety of standpoints connecting and deliberating, each with full recognition of the investments and positions of the others. The advocate in this model seeks not to persuade publics to a single point of view but to encourage debate. Secondly, it requires answerability to be built into the processes of advocacy. Utterances are acknowledged, validated, and responded to. Without these elements of disclosure, tolerance of dissent, and answerability, advocacy would not only not be ethical, but it actually would not work; reticulate

publics would not form, and they would not deliberate upon issues. Advocacy in this sense can be seen as propelled by Bakhtin's dialogism, which inherently exists in heteroglossia, the multiplicity of voices in interplay.

Recognising the nature of publics and allowing their organic and heterogeneous nature, we see where dialogue and discourse occur as emergences, rather than static, monologic noise. If dialogism routinely occurred through the vernacular exchanges in Hauser's rhetorical model, it might become a way of interaction that can redeem public relations practice, because it allows for the polyphony of voices and is responsive to other voices. In other words, in this definition of public relations, the practitioner cannot be monologic – the invitation for dialogue should be a primary consideration that is *a priori* to the practice itself.

Dialogism, within a reticulate public, can provide access to all voices situated within the spirit of ethical answerability. Advocacy public relations practiced in this way provides a Levinasian turn toward the Other, because it does not promote deception. It removes barriers of vague words and hidden agendas. It is compatible with Bakhtin's notion of answerability because of this ethical turning towards the other. Bakhtin's rhetorical theory can supplant public relations sophistry as it seeks to advocate a practical activity (Murphy, 2001). Of course, Olasky's model of advocacy public relations assumes the practitioner does not have an elitist mindset and that the practitioner wants to do well and make a personal profit at the same time, and does not see these as contradictory with an ethical focus. The real issue is that advocacy is open and reciprocal – it does not hide agendas and it does respond to vernacular voices in an ethical framework. Olasky's model can therefore work effectively within Hauser's vernacular rhetorical model, as suggested through Bakhtin's rhetorical guidelines.

Concluding Questions and Implications

Hauser's theory of publics asks *who* has a voice in public relations. Monologic forms of public relations do not allow more than one perspective to ask questions or influence debate. By inviting vernacular voices to be part of the conversation in a symmetrical relationship with practitioners of public relations, skepticism and cynicism are more likely to be reduced because there is a reciprocal rhetorical exchange.

Olasky's advocacy model of public relations asks *what* we can do with public relations to make it better. By asking this question the practitioner of public relations is acknowledging that care must be taken. Any rhetorical action is likely to have an impact on another. When a public relations practitioner is a transparent advocate rather than working from a closed adversarial standpoint, changes may occur in the public perception of how practitioners engage in their business. Advocacy practiced in this manner may help re-craft the negative image of public relations.

Bakhtin's dialogism suggests *how* the nuts and bolts of this might work in application. Dialogism offers the actual rhetorical means for initiating and guiding genuinely open communicative exchanges. Obviously substantial future work needs to be done to apply these theoretical constructs to specific public relations cases and situations, but this commentary piece has sought to put these three theoretical positions into the public domain as potentially complementary, and identify ways in which they may potentially be productive to a reconceptualisation of public relations practice which might address the profession's negative reputation.

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