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## Editorial: The current climate on publics segmentation research: Publics at a nexus of multiple identities and digitisation

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It is with great pleasure that we present this special issue of *PRism* on the state of segmentation of publics in public relations. Conceptualising publics has occupied the attention of scholars for decades. Since Ferguson's (1984) declaration of the value of understanding and researching organisation-public relationships, much research has been dedicated to understanding the functions of relationships. Yet, in recent scholarship, there have been limited efforts to revise our understandings of publics given vast shifts in digitisation, multiculturalism, and globalisation.

Early in the development of these macro-cultural changes, Vasquez and Taylor (2001) asserted the need to re-orient our standpoint on publics: "The public is often understood as a means to an organisation's end goal. Publics are, however, an integral part of public relations practice, and as a communicatively constructed social phenomenon, they deserve serious attention" (pp. 139-140). The common definition used to define a public stems from Dewey's (1927) understanding of the public: a group of individuals that organically emerge when impacted by a problem and who share a common interest in solving that common problem. However, although the public is the core concept of public relations, it continues to be inconsistently defined, which affects our organisational abilities to build strategies that fit publics neatly into current media, political, and organisational climates.

Furthermore, public relations theorists and practitioners have few theories that address segmenting publics. For example, Vasquez and Taylor (2001) outlined four approaches –

mass perspective, situational theory perspective, agenda-building perspective, and the homo narrans perspective. Of those theories and directions, the situational theory of publics and the mass perspective have been the paramount theories used to explore and test the idea of publics. However, Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones (2003) noted that as of 2000, only nine out of 148 theoretical articles in U.S. journals focused on situational theory, yet the situational theory is a mainstay in public relations textbooks. To exacerbate this theoretical stalemate, the situational theory of publics has been criticised as inflexible in addressing the shifting nature of publics and the social construction of issues in publics' minds: "When a public is conceptualized as a state of consciousness or as a sum of aggregate variables, the nature, role and influence of communication are overlooked completely, or at a minimum are taken for granted" (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001, p. 150).

To address the criticisms and challenges, new work is being done in this area. Scholars like Jeong-Nam Kim, James Grunig, and Lan Ni have initiated a new wave of situational theory studies that elaborate traditional information-seeking variables, such as information forwarding, to expand the breadth and depth of active information-seeking beyond original understandings (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim & Ni, 2010; Ni & Kim, 2009). New definitions of 'active' publics are required largely because the Internet provides limitless opportunities to seek information or communicate outwardly about an issue. Jeong-Nam Kim is also innovating methods for segmenting publics (see his commentary article in this issue) so more practitioners can use the

situational theory than before (due to the relative inaccessibility of the canonical correlation method).

Differently, identity scholars researching publics like Aldoory (2001), Aldoory and Sha (2007), Sison (2009), Vardeman-Winter and Tindall (2010), and Briones (2010) have taken more critical stances and challenged the basic premise of aggregating identities through additive approaches that most practitioners and researchers have used to identify publics. In their research on the health message construction for women of colour, Vardeman-Winter and Tindall (2010; 2011) found that multiplicative identities impact how women perceive messages and act on messages. Although the situational theory did apply to the publics, cultural and socioeconomic variables (which heavily impacted how women perceived the messages) were not addressed in the theory. These studies echo Sha's (2006) work that used cultural identity theory to extend the traditional, stagnant demographic approaches to segmenting publics.

These problems inspired us to propose this special issue so that we – as scholars, practitioners, and educators – could have an intellectual discourse about the status of contemporary publics and organisational approaches to segmenting publics for strategic purposes. The purpose of this special issue is to explore recent developments within the current segmentation theories, to highlight new approaches communicators can use to segment and prioritise publics, to reconsider how publics are dynamic and socially constructed phenomena that simple aggregative techniques cannot measure, and to demonstrate how these approaches have been used in practice. To do so, we posed the following questions in our call for papers: *what is the climate of publics-based research in public relations, and what are current challenges and approaches to the strategic segmentation of publics by organisations?*

## **A robust, diverse climate of publics-based research**

We asked in our call for papers for authors to address a question of “*what is the climate of publics-based research in public relations?*” After reading through the articles, we offer an answer to this, highlighting the breadth of methods, the diverse range of samples, and the multiple paradigmatic approaches to studying publics. We have found support for the original assumption in the call, which was that there exists a variety of ways publics are conceptualised and operationalised, and in light of technological and cultural shifts since 2001, this topic needs serious revisiting.

In essence, the climate of publics-based research in public relations is robust and innovative! First, we received 13 original manuscripts, responding to the call. Reviewers chose five for the refereed section, and we also invited one article to the commentary section from a scholar, Jeong-Nam Kim at Purdue University, U.S., conducting significant expansions of the original situational theory of publics (now referred to as the situational theory of problem-solving).

This special issue showcases the richness of thought about publics that expands the scholarship and acknowledges the robust diversity within the discipline about the imagination and characterisation of those groups. The authors in this issue have addressed new methods, samples, and approaches to access the psyches of publics. Interestingly, no two studies employed the same methods or samples:

- Alessandro Lovari, Soojin Kim, Kelly Vibber, and Jeong-Nam Kim conducted a computer-aided telephone interview survey of citizens in Siena, Italy, to create a new typology of publics based on digital media usage and its relationships to civic engagement;

- Katie Stansberry employed network analysis of mommy bloggers to learn more about how practitioners can reach interest-based networks;

- Lisa Fall and Charles Lubbers used quantitative segmentation analysis to learn how membership in generational cohorts determined

tourists' digital media use for information about recreational activities;

- Leysan Khakimova, Rowena Briones, Stephanie Madden, and Thomas Campbell reflected upon the ethnographic methods they used to conduct a participatory-based campaign with immigrant teen girls;

- Karen Hilyard, Tatjana Hocke, and Erin Ryan qualitatively analysed the content of three federally-sponsored emergency preparedness websites encouraging children to become disaster-ready; and

- Jeong-Nam Kim revealed the summation procedure for public segmentation, which is easier, methodologically, than the traditional use of canonical correlation, but still predictive, and may help more practitioners use the theory for programming purposes.

#### **Public formation in new media.**

Despite the varied approaches to studying the natures and behaviours of modern publics, two major similarities emerged from the articles. Without being required to consider online presence in the call for papers, the majority of the refereed articles demonstrated the stark gravity of online and digital media as a factor in publics' behaviours: Lovari et al.'s and Fall and Lubbers' studies found that publics could be segmented based on their online activity as it relates to other characteristics like age, education, and gender, which then can help communicators predict behaviour around issues (e.g., civic participation and travel activities, respectively). Similarly, Stansberry and Hilyard et al. researched websites intended for interest-based and role-based publics to determine specialised analytical tools that can be used by public relations practitioners to better communicate with publics (e.g., network analysis and website usability criteria, respectively). In comparison to 10 and 20 years ago when publics' mass media behaviours were being observed, this snapshot of studies shows that scholars and practitioners are not only interested – but are

expected – to learn how online behaviour has re-embodied public formations and actions.

#### **The emergence of the participatory public.**

Digitisation is not the only cultural shift that has impacted our publics-based scholarship in the past 10 years. The social aspect of publics-based activity – perhaps encouraged by the progress of digitisation – is a paradigmatic shift. Whereas publics were largely categorised according to their position in relation to an issue (Grunig, 1997), the articles in this special issue suggest that publics are being understood more as communicative actors around issues *because of* their identities, experiences, and cultures. In other words, researchers in this issue are realising how publics' identities are more complex and are often *defined by* their communication behaviour. For example, Hilyard et al. sought to understand whether websites effectively enabled children to pass information along to their parents about emergency preparedness; the websites' purposes are to engage an already active online public in information-seeking about a topic children can help their families with, disaster preparedness. The authors stress that children are important publics – more so than our discipline has ever given proper attention to – because their preferences and loyalties are forming early, they heavily influence their parents' buying decisions, and they are using Internet resources/media more every year.

In two pieces that could be considered part of the critical agenda of publics research, Stansberry and Khakimova et al. demonstrated that publics' identities could be the largest influence of social role enactment as communicators, or “audience as producers” (Stansberry, p. 10). In both pieces, authors examine performance as social actors (Stansberry) and immigrant teenage girls as producers of campaigns targeting girls like themselves (Khakimova et al.). Stansberry's study reaffirms James Carey's cultural transmission model of communication in her study of blogging as a movement of “participatory media,” which shows how “mommy bloggers” are not isolated individuals

who do not contribute to a larger discourse of important issues because of the overuse of “personal musings”. Rather, they create “radical” progressive debate because of their social roles as digitally enabled voices: “The radical nature of mommy blogging comes not from the bloggers’ willingness to discuss private topics but rather in their ability to reconstitute motherhood through the accumulation of many pieces of commentary on the process of raising a child” (Stansberry p. 10).

Khakimova et al. took a similar stance in highlighting the participatory approach to communication in their case study of a campaign by and for teen, immigrant girls. Rather than examining participatory media, the authors brought forth the intersecting identities of the participants as the salient factor driving the need for participatory campaign production. The consumers of the campaign – the teen girls – represented a mix of identities that the producers would never wholly understand, as the public demonstrated communication behaviour based on multiple identities of being teens (age identity), being girls (gender identity), being immigrants (in this case, largely racial, ethnic, and nationality identities), and being from low-income families (socioeconomic identity). Their retelling of the formative research process and the communication tactics designed and employed by the teen girls stresses the inherent power differentials in the highly-problematic traditional producer-consumer gap: “The complexities associated with various identities of the teenage girls in those communities have made it clear early in the research process that the campaign organisers would never be able to fully understand the identity of the target audience” (p. 8).

In summary, the articles exhibit a healthy desire to understand how publics are innovated because of and through digital and new media and the social opportunities and obligations inherent in new communication technology. The management strategy of segmenting publics according to discrete categories may cease to exist soon, as publics

change interests, cultural and ideological alliances, and social and physical locales often. However, as discussed in the next section, researchers are up for observing and learning from these challenges and provide myriad ways for practitioners to employ innovative, creative processes of public engagement.

### **Power and new mediated challenges to segmentation of publics**

With this special issue, we also sought to answer, “*What are current challenges and approaches to the strategic segmentation of publics by organisations?*” Each article presented important challenges to segmentation, although the challenges discussed tended toward issues around power or issues around how to navigate segmentation amid new technological terrain.

*Power challenges.* Longstanding public relations challenges persist, such as the use of static content and one-way communication (Hilyard et al.). The findings from Hilyard et al.’s research are significant because of the revitalised interest by governments, non-profit organisations, and private sector groups to sponsor issue-driven emergency preparedness communication efforts. For purposes of preparing entire populations and natural, human-caused, and technological disasters, basic website functionality should be a given. Hilyard et al.’s finding that websites communicating important messages to children are lacking in performance, shows patent missed opportunities, and demonstrates the organisers/producers’ glaring lack of understanding about publics’ needs and preferences for communication.

Disparate identities of producers and consumers can also result in campaign messages that ‘miss the target’. These occur because communicators must make mindful, often time- and resource-consuming efforts to close producer-consumer gaps. At the heart of the producer-consumer gap are “intrinsic power differences between researchers, who in the conventional communication campaigns are often regarded as experts, and participants, who are typically viewed as uninformed targets of

the campaigns” (Khakimova et al., p. 4). The effort to close these gaps – which many communicators may see as a burden or impossibility due to time and budget constraints – remains an *othered* approach to communication. This is particularly important today, as publics move to integrate themselves into new societies, cultures, and experiences, thereby creating an evolving multi-cultured public identity and experience.

*New mediated challenges.* The new issues that our authors brought to light pivot around the nature of the digitisation of public formation. To this point, Fall and Lubbers’ study suggested that word-of-mouth communication is becoming outdated compared with digital media for travellers seeking information about locations and activities for recreation, and they challenge the use of word-of-mouth in its reliability to predict consumer behaviour: “it makes sense that word-of-mouth is going by the wayside and being replaced with ‘word-of-net’” (p. 16). Differently, Lovari et al.’s study found that Italians participating in civic activities use analogue media for information more than pure digital media. These seemingly contradictory findings imply further complication into the nature and predictability of publics and reaffirm suggestions by most scholars in this issue that all elements (e.g., demographics, social issues, social activities, and social roles) must be examined holistically. These studies suggest that most groups – despite their relative similarities as mothers, civic activists, or tourists – break down into multiple ‘sub’ groups, and behaviours often cross demographic and sociographic boundaries.

In response to this problem – along with problems of stigmatisation of publics because of their online identities and practices – a recognition that the traditional, transmission of model of communication may not work with online publics (Stansberry). Rather, an emerging “social digital public” (Lovari et al.) must be explored in the context of ethical, pro-publics public relations purposes. In essence, publics are not monoliths, and the use of digital media by publics does not alone

distinguish publics from one another; rather, cultural contexts – based in social identities, roles, and interests – are hugely compelling for future public relations research and practical segmentation.

### **New publics agendas**

This special issue is evidence that researchers are looking for new ways to classify publics according to more natural segments, given today’s complicated communication landscape. However, publics are also manifesting a rich display of active communication behaviour, forcing communicators to take notice. Publics are engaging new media and traditional media in new mixes to engage in and navigate age-old life issues and experiences like having a voice in their communities (Lovari et al.), mothering and parenting (Stansberry), traveling and enjoying new places (Fall & Lubbers), coming of age and dealing with difference (Khakimova et al.), and learning how families can prepare for the worst (Hilyard et al.).

Based on these intrinsic evolutions of publics, these articles demonstrate how public relations practitioners are employing new media in creative – sometimes experimental – ways in hope of reaching unchartered publics and negotiating new barriers to communication. A significant area for further development is to learn how communicators are approaching the emphasis on intersections that new publics and new media bring: publics are now tripled – they have a digital presence, an offline presence, and a hybrid presence that consist of different abilities, motivations, and voices. This fact alone proposes that public relations researchers, practitioners, and educators have a full and puzzling agenda ahead of learning how publics will choose which organisations and issues to engage and what their communication will look like.

On a final note, we found these articles to represent an important shift in communicators and researchers perceiving publics more as groups of individuals seeking important answers versus as business goals to be met, as authors like Vasquez and Taylor (2001) and Ferguson (1984) persuaded us to see them 10

and 20 years ago, respectively. Powerful words and suggestions like practitioners observing the “cultural creation of publics through communication” (Stansberry, p. 10), publics “raising their voice[s]” (Lovari et al., p. 16), communicators “determining how [publics] identify themselves would prove crucial to learning how to segment them effectively” (Khakimova et al., p. 7), and practitioners “engaging in dialogue with children” (Hilyard et al., p. 14) suggest innovative understandings of practitioners’ roles with publics that likely were not considered decades ago when traditional segmentation models of publics were formulated and popularised. These are encouraging findings from this snapshot of publics-based studies, which resonate with a new epistemology among researchers, practitioners, and educators of pro-publics public relations.

We extend our deepest gratitude to those who have helped to make this special issue possible: the *PRism* editorial board who saw the need for such a discussion and were willing to allow us to helm this issue; Dr Elspeth Tilley for guiding us through the editorial process; the authors from many countries and backgrounds who submitted papers; and the volunteer reviewers for their expertise, time, and comments. All participants heightened this special issue’s examination of segmentation and publics. We hope you enjoy reading, and we look forward to your comments and suggestions for future research in this area.

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