
How today's digital landscape redefines the notion of power in public relations

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Abstract

*Power has been a key construct in the field of public relations for decades, yet the proliferation of online communities has forced practitioners to re-evaluate notions of where power is situated. Online communities, such as the It Gets Better Project, call for public relations work to take place **within** the organisation-public configuration rather than situated externally in the relationship **between** the organisation and its publics. This new kind of public relations work locates power very much in the hands of participants in online communities rather than in the organisational hierarchy or the public relations practitioner, and it calls for public relations practitioners to act as online community managers who monitor the ebb and flow of community needs and dynamics. Offering a radical departure from previous notions of power in public relations practice, we believe this reconceptualisation is necessary for enabling relevant public relations scholarship and teaching in a digital landscape where online organisations do not always appear or function the same as traditional brick-and-mortar organisations. Accordingly, we put forth a new model of public relations: the participant-curator model.*

Introduction

Public relations scholars have been concerned with the concept of power for decades, making sense of practitioners' place within the 'dominant coalition' of organisational hierarchies (Berger, 2005; Broom & Dozier, 1986; J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; L. Grunig, 1992), interrogating issues of gender and

race/ethnicity in the profession (Daymon & Demetrious, 2010; Place, 2011; Tindall, 2009a, 2009b; Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010), and advancing new models for more effectively managing relationships and power dynamics between organisations and publics (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot & Mitrook, 1997; Curtain & Gaither, 2005). Much of this scholarly development, however, presupposes the very existence of discrete organisational entities and stakeholders, which in turn locates the public relations practitioner as a broker of power between disparate parts. New entities, primarily online community-driven businesses and not-for-profit organisations, have emerged in recent years which challenge this concept, proposing instead a new order of organisation-public relationships that are fluid, unstable, and at times non-hierarchical, where online communities drive the very business of the organisation. These new entities, then, call for public relations work to take place *within* the organisation-public configuration rather than situated externally in the relationship *between* the organisation and its publics. This new kind of public relations work locates power very much in the hands of participants in online communities rather than in the organisational hierarchy or the public relations practitioner, and it calls for public relations practitioners to act as online community managers who monitor the ebb and flow of community needs and dynamics. Offering a radical departure from previous notions of power in public relations practice, we believe this reconceptualisation is necessary for enabling relevant public relations scholarship and teaching in a digital landscape where online organisations do not always appear, or function,

the same as traditional brick-and-mortar organisations.

In this critical essay, we shift the focus of power in public relations away from more traditional conceptualisations centred on public relations practitioners within ‘corporate capitalist entities’ (Weaver, 2001) and consider power within new online community-driven entities where public relations may be just one of several concurrent roles that an executive may take on. By focusing on one exemplar case, the It Gets Better Project, we critique the existing literature on power in public relations and propose a new way of thinking about organisation-public relationships through a participant-curator model of public relations. In light of this framework, we conclude with a call for more research on the future of public relations in the areas of power and online community management, including what this power shift may mean for the professionalisation of public relations and the training of public relations students.

Power and control in public relations

As Berger (2005) asserted in his influential article on power in public relations, “any public relations theory is deficient to the extent that it fails to account for power relations and structures in organizations” (p. 23). Building on work that examined the place of power in coalition building (Berger, 2005; Cancel et al., 1997; Plowman, 1998), a collection of scholars began to interrogate the notion of power through the lens of critical-cultural theory. These scholars peer at the state of public relations practice through the tint of Foucault (Heath, Motion & Leitch, 2009; Motion, 2005; Motion & Leitch, 2007), Bourdieu (Edwards, 2006; Ihlen, 2005), or du Gay (Curtin & Gaither, 2005), and though they provide valuable insight into the workings of power in our traditional conception of public relations, they never go as far as to question the veracity of the organisation-public divide itself. Furthermore, these arguments assume discrete organisational and stakeholder entities, professional identity of the public relations practitioner, and relationships between these distant parts that need managing, with the

exception of Holtzhausen’s (2000) application of postmodern values to public relations. Holtzhausen argued that public relations practitioners face a “balancing act between management practices based on modernist principles of command and control and the postmodern expectations of those people who constitute the organization’s multicultural, multi-ethnic, and gendered internal and external publics” and that two-way symmetrical public relations does not adequately account for power differences (p. 93). Holtzhausen proposes that there is as much, if not more, to be learned from dissymmetry and dissensus than symmetry and consensus, respectively, and that a heightened awareness of metanarratives created by public relations must be accounted for, such as the very idea that public relations helps to reinforce power structures within a capitalistic society.

In extending Holtzhausen’s (2000) arguments, and in contrasting previous scholars’ assumptions mentioned above, we argue that a number of emerging entities driven by the power of online communities—not the power of corporate hierarchies—dismantle the previously held assumption that 1) organisations exist within identifiable boundaries; 2) their stakeholders exist beyond those boundaries; and 3) the role of the public relations practitioner is, at least in part, to bridge these two players together in mutually beneficial ways through the techniques of relationship management (Ferguson, 1984). Instead, all these pieces are collapsed into an organic whole, necessitating a radical revision of the concept of power in public relations. Moreover, the concept of control, which is intimately tied to power in public relations, must also be re-evaluated. We argue that control is the concrete action that puts the abstract concept of power into practice, and control is discussed in the following section.

Control in public relations

Control is at the heart of modernist or functionalist public relations theories and practice (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002), embedded even in the language of the discipline as practitioners attempt to ‘crystallise’ public opinion, ‘manage’ relationships, ‘disseminate’ information, and

‘maintain command’ in a crisis. With regards to messaging, Bivins (2011) states that the tactical dimension of public relations practice is comprised of two broad categories: “uncontrolled information” and “controlled information”. The former refers to messages that are filtered—“laundered” even—through another party, usually the media, but this “loss in control is usually more than balanced by the overall gain in credibility” of a news organisation reporting on the client or issue, whereas controlled information is that which public relations practitioners have “total control as to editorial content, style, placement, and timing,” such as brochures, advertisements, and public service announcements (PSAs) (Bivins, 2011, p. 5). Echoing the sentiment of Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), Bivins distinguishes these two categories as a way to illustrate the balance of control and surrender in which practitioners consciously engage. Even with uncontrolled information, the assumption is that public relations practitioners have a measure of control over the client or brand to begin with, and that the outside force of the media has an impact on the integrity of the message in the filtering process. Losing control presupposes having control in the first place.

The locus of control also underpins the distinction between ‘stakeholders’ and ‘publics’, two terms often problematically conflated in the public relations literature. Quoting J. Grunig and Repper (1992), Rawlins (2006) distinguishes the two terms:

James Grunig has differentiated the terms “stakeholder” and “public” in the following way: organisations choose stakeholders by their marketing strategies, recruiting, and investment plans, but “publics arise on their own and choose the organization for attention”. (p. 2)

Following this logic, public relations strategy aimed at stakeholders assumes more control of the message’s audience, an inside-out organisational stance. In contrast, an organisation with an outside-in stance adopts a public relations strategy of listening to and giving audiences more control over their relationship with the organisation. This

stakeholder-public distinction is again a language issue, but the importance of language and metaphors to structure and orient a whole system of concepts, including social life, law, and professional communications practice, cannot be emphasised enough (Drucker & Gumpert, 1995; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Moving beyond rhetoric, the concept of control in public relations can be examined as a function of distance between an organisation and its public. J. Grunig’s four models of public relations that continue to receive a sizable portion of space within public relations journals and textbooks (Gower, 2006) seem to progress from the press agency model (model 1) to the two-way symmetric model (model 4) in a way that closes the distance between an organisation and its publics, shifting the public relations practitioner into the role of mediator between the two parties in iterative, negotiated communication. A substantial body of literature has also attempted to temper this black-and-white distinction between an organisation, its publics, and the amount of control a public relations practitioner has over the flow of information. For instance, Holtzhausen (2000) argues that two-way symmetrical public relations fails to accurately account for the diversity inherent within an organisation’s publics today and the power dynamics within the organisation-public relationship; Dougall (2006) complicates this neat distinction by advocating a conflict continuum to understand publics’ subjective experiences and their relationship with organisations over time; and Seltzer (2006) suggests a co-orientational approach for analysing organisation-public relationships. A drift away from the uncontrolled-controlled dichotomy is a step toward an ideal form of public relations according to J. Grunig, but this evolution still assumes distinct boundaries between an organisation and its information and the publics who receive the information, no matter how small the ‘distance’ between the two parties. These theoretical extensions seem to *advocate* J. Grunig’s fourth model of PR, the two-way symmetrical model, as the normative ideal, rather than to *advance* it into new territory by challenging previously held assumptions.

Other foundational public relations theories touch on the organisation-public distance. Relationship management theory is predicated on the fact that organisation-public relationships are the heart of public relations and that the practitioners' role is to "effectively manage" these relationships (Ledingham, 2003, p. 190). Although the very nature of relationships change over time and the organisation and its public(s) are to be viewed as equals, effectiveness is measured through "mutual understanding and benefit" (Ledingham, 2003, p. 188), with the presumption that the organisation is steering the relationship because it has something to gain from the process. As with two-way symmetrical relationships, it is assumed that distinct boundaries exist between the organisation and its publics and that the act of actively managing the relationship takes place in the distance between these separate entities rather than within the organisation-public configuration. Again, little consideration is given to the power differentials inherent in the normative theoretical framework that on the one hand denounces the existence of an organisation-public hierarchy while on the other tasks the organisation with managing the relationship between the two.

Closely related to relationship management theory but distinct from it, dialogic theory considers the organisation-public relationship and places the burden of the success and ethicality of that relationship on the organisation. Dialogue is considered a product, not a process, that requires a substantial amount of time and energy for all involved, but the framework has received criticism for the inability of dialogue to exist in all situations; the potentiality that publics will be manipulated or exploited for an organisation's gain; and that little empirical data exists rendering dialogue as inherently more ethical than non-dialogic communications between an organisation and its publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Distinct boundaries are once again assumed between the organisation and its publics.

In the domain of crisis communication, even more attention has been paid to this organisation-public boundary, presumably because crises are essentially unpredictable

external stimuli and crisis public relations practitioners are more often thinking from the outside-in. Yet crisis communication literature emphasises the features of J. Grunig's third and fourth models of public relations, placing the focus on the intelligence function of an organisation in the wake of a crisis. Furthermore, the crisis literature often views external stimuli (including the content generated by publics online) as a threat, as very much separate from the organisation and undesirable. For Comfort (2007), control is one of the "four Cs of emergency management", along with cognition, communication, and coordination. Often paired as "command and control" in crisis situations,

Control in disaster operations cannot be achieved through hierarchical measures alone. Rather, it develops through a process of rapid assessment of risk, integration of information from multiple sources, the capacity to formulate strategic plans of action, identification and correction of error, and a continual monitoring and feedback process among key actors. (Comfort, 2007, p. 192)

Maintaining command and control in a crisis, then, is about excellent execution of J. Grunig's two-way asymmetric model, to act in very controlled ways in light of new information streaming in. The current understanding of crisis communication is thus an assumption that organisations should keep their ears open to what publics need in order to achieve and maintain firm control over a situation.

J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2010) provided insight into the Excellence Theory's relevance to public relations in 2010, and on the topic of social media and its impact on messaging control in public relations declared that organisations were never in complete control. Although social media present a new channel in which publics and organisations can communicate, the organisational public relations objective should never be one of control:

It's not so much a matter of controlling information going to publics but participating in their conversations that

are taking place around the organizations and in organizations and about organizations (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2010, p. 10).

As J. Grunig (2010) stated, and the trade press has frequently echoed, social media have and will undoubtedly contribute heavily to the future of public relations. But rather than providing an avenue for two-way symmetry between organisations and publics, in which the focus is on the relationship between a discrete organisation and its discrete publics, we argue that another model is emerging. Reminiscent of the two-way asymmetrical model, in which the organisation retained most of the communication control while strategically surrendering some control, we argue that power and control increasingly rests in the hands of publics and seek to extend previous postmodern approaches to public relations (Gower, 2006; Heath, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Weaver, 2001). By first reviewing online communities broadly and then the It Gets Better Project specifically, we debunk the notion of two-way symmetrical relationships in which power is conceptualised as merely a function of relationship management and advocate for a participant-curator model of public relations.

Online community-driven entities

New media technologies challenge much of what we know about public relations theory and practice, since these technologies fundamentally change the ways publics interact with organisations, particularly the speed with which that interaction happens. New media technologies, such as the Internet, enable a great deal of temporal flexibility and can facilitate real-time communication (e.g., chat, instant messaging, tweets), rapid message exchange (e.g., email), or indefinite asynchronous communication (e.g., bulletin board systems and blogs, where users can read and leave messages for one another across long stretches of time). New media technologies also have an enormous reach, as messages on the Internet are globally accessible to those with connectivity. Furthermore, these technologies allow users to remain anonymous as they

participate in information exchange online, throwing accountability and authenticity into question and giving rise to phenomena such as ‘flaming’ (Lange, 2006; Suler, 2004). As Bucher (2002) expertly summarises, the

high degree of disembeddedness makes Internet communication highly risky, because disembedding always means loss of control: control over sources and their reliability, control over selection, control over verification. (para. 24)

However, the most significant change in terms of control and public relations in the new media era concerns the ability for users to quickly and easily produce and distribute content to a global audience. In today’s so-called ‘Web 2.0’ era of the Internet (O’Reilly, 2005), we have seen an upsurge in user-generated content. Organisations are shifting their online presence from static web pages to dynamic interfaces; integrating with social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Four Square; and encouraging users to create content on behalf of, or in response to, the organisation’s brand. As practitioner Dan Tisch remarked in the *New York Times*, “In a world where the ordinary consumer is walking around with global publishing power in his or her pocket, the role of public relations and corporate communications has shifted from creating content to attempting to influence the content that’s created by others” (Elliot, 2011).

More organisations understand the importance of new media than actually embrace it effectively (Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser & Howes, 2009; McCorkindale, 2010; Zeffass, Fink & Linke, 2011), and, unfortunately, the public relations literature, which has struggled to thoroughly address social media, has largely seen this kind of online user interaction as either a potential threat to an organisation or as a phenomenon to be controlled. González-Herrero and Smith (2008) assume that the Internet brings new kinds of threats to an organisation, and they encourage public relations practitioners to be vocal online quickly in order to maintain control of a crisis. Focusing on the evolution of content about corporate scandals on Wikipedia, DiStaso and

Messner (2010) correctly observe that “Wikipedia is an example of the fact that companies cannot always control what others say and publish about them” (p. 20). However, their implicit recommendation to public relations practitioners is that familiarity and engagement with social media enables an organisation to maintain control of its image in the face of ‘forced transparency’ online. An alternative viewpoint expressed in the public relations literature is that it is a beast to be tamed, and good management of technologies will allow organisations to capitalise on publics in quite asymmetrical ways. Gustavsen and Tilley (2003) recommend corporate websites become more interactive to encourage publics to engage with the company and have positive feelings about the organisation. They emphasise ‘user control’ as one of six important dimensions of website interactivity, drawing upon Dholakia et al.’s definition of user control as “the extent to which an individual can choose the timing, content, and sequence of a communication” (Dholakia, Zhao, Dholakia & Fortin, 2000, cited in Gustavsen & Tilley, 2003, p. 6). Ahn’s (2009) additional findings on the specific concept of user control support Gustavsen and Tilley’s (2003) claims. Both attitudes about new media—as a threat to be pre-empted or as a tool to be managed for organisational gain—encourage public relations practitioners to hold on tightly to control, a sentiment echoed with regularity in the trade press as well (Cross, 2012).

The reality of the new media landscape, however, is that organisations are not in control, and public relations practitioners need to move beyond the control-surrender dynamic in order to get the most out of their publics. Social media, for instance, challenge power structures tied to the dissemination of mass messages. With increasing access to digital media technologies, more publics are able to craft and distribute their own messages, and organisations shift to incorporate people into brand development from the outset. As publics continue to create their own messaging and select the outlets in which to distribute it, the relationships that publics ascribe to an organisation are modified; often times the organisation must contend with no longer being

the focal point of the messaging while being relegated to the periphery, or worse: becoming the focal point of negative messaging (Krishnamurthy & Kucuk, 2009; Kucuk, 2008). Nonetheless, practitioners do have a new kind of control over defining the spaces in which this uncontrolled messaging takes place and over identifying opportunities to engage publics.

There are organisations that make use of social media and online communities, but then there is a whole new breed of organisation that has emerged over the past decade that incorporates the energies of online communities in the daily functioning of the organisation. These new entities, online community-driven organisations, only exist because of their online communities where the community members design products, solve problems, create communal resources, make business decisions, and produce large portions—sometimes all—of the content and messaging the organisation uses. Labelled as examples of stigmergic collaboration (Elliott, 2006), organised networks (Rossiter, 2006), crowdsourcing (Brabham, 2008), commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2002), online grassroots organising (Wittig & Schmitz, 1996), and other phenomena, these new organisational forms de-emphasise the notion of control in favour of cultivation, mutual collaboration, and bottom-up creation. One recent, newsworthy exemplar of this new breed of organisation is the It Gets Better Project, the features of which are illustrated in the following section.

The It Gets Better Project

Prompted by news of two youth suicides, both of whom had endured peer bullying and harassment on the basis of their actual and perceived sexual orientation, and a reader’s comment about the suicides on his blog, relationship and sex columnist Dan Savage and his husband, Terry Miller, created a YouTube video channel called the It Gets Better Project on 15 September 2010. With the intent of serving as a direct line of communication to at-risk lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, Savage and Miller’s YouTube channel began with the uploading of

their own video testimonial. In the eight-and-a-half minute video, Savage and Miller described their struggles as gay youth, revealing stories of their own bullying and harassment, and subsequently how life got better once both men left their youth behind and were able to find joy in love, career, and family.¹ As a columnist with Seattle's alternative weekly newspaper *The Stranger*, Savage used his platform to place a rallying call for LGBTQ adults –“singles and couples, with kids or without, established in careers or just starting out, urban and rural, of all races and religious backgrounds”– to create videos of their own to help show LGBTQ youth that life does in fact get better once you leave adolescence behind (Savage, 2010a).

The It Gets Better Project experienced exponential growth from its inception that many online communities simply do not. Within a week, the channel had received more than 1,000 videos, exceeding the channel's capacity and rendering it necessary to create a separate website altogether (Advocate.com Editors, 2010; Savage, 2010b). After just three weeks, the It Gets Better Project became part of the Iola Foundation, a registered tax-exempt non-profit organisation, and shifted from a YouTube-based message to a small but burgeoning organisation heavily dependent on volunteers. Today, itgetsbetter.org boasts more than 50,000 videos from contributors in multiple countries, video viewership has extended beyond 50 million total hits worldwide, and country-specific It Gets Better Project affiliates have been launched outside of the U.S.A. as well (What is It Gets Better Australia, 2011).

Videos continue to populate the It Gets Better Project's YouTube channel and outside the channel within YouTube more broadly. Both the traditional and new media have regularly covered the 'movement' (Butler, 2010), and social, political, and legal attention has been drawn to the problem of school bullying pertaining to sexual orientation. Many videos direct viewers to resources that can provide help to those in need, such as suicide prevention organisation The Trevor Project and the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), both of whom are benefactors of all revenue generated by the It

Gets Better Project (About, n.d.), including personal donations offered directly to Savage, t-shirt fundraising drives (About, n.d.), and the 22 March 2011 *It Gets Better* book release (Bosman, 2010).

A crucial turning point in the It Gets Better Project's lifecycle was the October 2010 transformation from campaign to an organisation and ultimately the development of itgetsbetter.org. The official website asks visitors to take the It Gets Better pledge, watch a selection of videos, read about the project, make a donation, and 'connect with us' on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, entities in which the It Gets Better Project has an organisational presence. The website functions as the organisational hub and a gathering place for those impacted by peer bullying and harassment, and it is a constant reminder that the It Gets Better Project simply would not exist without the help of one of its key publics: LGBTQ and heterosexual allied video producers.

We analysed the It Gets Better Project case at a key point in the project's early growth and have followed the project's growth closely over the past 18 months. With the aid of screen-capture software, we logged all of the videos on the It Gets Better Project YouTube channel at 11:15 a.m. EDT on 15 October 2010, less than a month after the project's launch. This log included 811 videos at a total run time of more than 67 hours, with a total number of views at 846,683. The average video ran just under five minutes long, and the overwhelming majority of videos featured single individuals speaking into a camera in typical video blog, or 'vlog', fashion (Christian, 2009). True to Savage's mission, the channel included videos representing the full spectrum of LGBTQ experience across many categories of gender, sexuality, nationality, race, ethnicity, age, religion, and (dis)ability.

While Savage cannot control what people say in their videos and states on the It Gets Better Project Web site's 'About' page that "...every video changes a life. It doesn't matter who makes it", he has mentioned that not all videos initially received were posted on the website; rather, initially he admittedly selected which videos were added to the collection and

has now off-loaded the task of vetting videos to volunteers (Advocate.com Editors, 2010; Parker-Pope, 2010). He also expressed concern that some participants have created videos that singularly focus on bullying, as they reductively state that it gets better without showing or telling viewers *how* life improves or what was done to improve it. Ironically, Savage's concerns echoed criticism that he has received for the project overall: that the videos themselves do not solve the problems of bullying, with which he concurs. Nevertheless, he defends the project by arguing that the videos are a step in the right direction in the interim when public opinion and subsequent policy can be extremely slow moving to change (Hartlaub, 2010). While Savage and the volunteers exhibit a level of control as the It Gets Better Project's gatekeepers, their ultimate role is that of message curators and brand community managers.

The It Gets Better Project is a burgeoning online community that was specifically selected for this study because of the manner in which the functionalist organisation-public distinction is complicated. It is a timely development from which much can be learned, particularly concerning the locus of control and power in public relations. While the It Gets Better Project provides just one example, it is symptomatic of a general power shift in the new media era where publics are largely message creators and disseminators rather than mere respondents. A prime example of this shift in control was exhibited by Skittles' 2009 experiments with homepage design in which the candy's website featured its Twitter, Facebook, and Wikipedia pages and let users' comments populate the page instantaneously, which backfired almost immediately as inappropriate comments streamed across the brand's official website (Smith, 2009). Other examples of this shift in control include online communities such as Threadless.com (Brabham, 2008; Howe, 2006), Ravelry.com (Humphreys, 2008), Wikipedia.org (Bryant, Forte & Bruckman, 2005), and the Finnish crowd-produced film *Star Wreck: In the Pirkinning* (Lietsala & Joutsen, 2007), all of which would not exist without the production of goods and information by community

members and within which there is no separate relationship to negotiate since the organisation and the publics are not discrete entities. In the midst of organisational changes, some scholars have argued that communication control has indeed shifted as well:

I think the future of public relations is in social media... Social media or digital media put control of communication behaviour in the hands of publics. They have access to whatever sources of information they want. And practitioners, therefore, have to engage more in dialogue and more symmetrical communication because publics will get information someplace else otherwise. (J. Grunig, 2010, 2:06)

What becomes evident from an analysis of online-based communities and organisations like the It Gets Better Project, then, is that traditional articulations of power and control rooted in conceptualisations of organisation-publics as separate, discrete entities in which public relations practitioners serve as communication moderators fail to explain what is at play. It becomes necessary for scholars to continue theorising power dynamics in public relations by taking the important step of acknowledging the diversity of public relations in modern-day organisational settings that vary tremendously from traditional, brick-and-mortar corporations.

Toward a participant-curator model of public relations

We propose a shift in the way we should think about the role of public relations in the digital landscape, and we offer a new set of metaphors for making sense of these new realities. We put forth here a participant-curator model of public relations, one that better describes the interactions between public relations practitioners and online community members rather than a model predicated on the assumption of organisations interacting with stakeholders.

The term 'participant' is an apt descriptor of an individual in an online community, what might have formerly been regarded as a 'stakeholder' or a member of one or more

'publics'. Participants may be committed, ongoing players or they may be fleeting, dropping in and out of various stages of engagement with a brand or activity. Indeed, online communities include a broad spectrum of individuals who self-select into the community and who exhibit various levels of engagement. The urban planning literature on public participation knows this diversity of participation through metaphors of concentric circles or 'ladders' of engagement, from the most involved 'power centre' to the apathetic 'silent majority' (Maier, 2001). And Internet studies literature knows this diversity of participation as the "90-9-1 rule," where generally 90% of users online are "lurkers", 9% of users "contribute from time to time," and about 1% "participate a lot and account for most contributions" (Nielsen, 2006, para. 4). Referring to publics or stakeholders instead as 'participants' better captures this fluidity and diversity of engagement with an online community and thus with an organisation driven by online communities.

The term 'curator' best describes the role of the public relations practitioner in this new landscape. The concept of curation has taken hold in the discourse about social media, and it is beginning to receive theoretical development (e.g., Evans, 2010; Hogan, 2010):

Curation in the community and membership context helps provide a better experience for [an organization's] members and thereby encourages the collaborative activities seen in the higher forms of engagement. (Evans, 2010, p. 175)

We choose the term 'curator' for its resonance with the profession of museum exhibitions and museum management. We make an important distinction between curation and two related concepts, gatekeeping and archiving. Gatekeeping (White, 1950) is the act by which journalists select news for inclusion in a newspaper or news programme. Though true journalistic objectivity is inherently impossible in light of journalists' inescapable bias and subjectivity, journalists nonetheless strive for objectivity in the gatekeeping process, following normative news values including

relevance and timeliness (Golding & Elliott, 2000). Gatekeeping is thus a process of filtering based on 'objective' criteria, where the need for a gatekeeper herself should be theoretically nonexistent. On the other hand, we view archiving as the act of collection and preservation that is maximally inclusive. That is, archives strive to be as complete as possible and archivists exclude information that is not at all relevant to the topic.

In the context of a museum or art exhibit, though, a curator takes on a more active and strategic role than a gatekeeper or archivist. For instance, curators working to develop an exhibit about Native American culture for a human history museum select the artifacts, artistic works, political documents, etc. from a large corpus of items in a Native American culture archive. The curator makes strategic and creative decisions to include and exclude some items and to present cultural items in a way that educates a public or invokes emotional response or political action. The same is true of a curator of an art exhibit. The best of Andy Warhol's art, according to the curator, is purposefully hung in a gallery space for publics to contemplate and react to, however they see fit. Curation is a subjective process of exclusion and inclusion of information into a whole body. Thus it is also a strategic and political practice involving the management of information.²

Our argument is that this act of curation is precisely what takes place at the It Gets Better Project and at a number of other organisations where online communities drive the entire organisation through their participation. The It Gets Better organisation curates the video content it receives from LGBTQ adults and straight allies into the project. Through this curation, participants make the organisation and other publics—LGBTQ youth, The Trevor Project, and GLSEN—benefit. The content-creators (participants) hold the majority of the power over the It Gets Better brand, while Savage channels some of this energy toward the other benefitting publics. Interestingly, The Trevor Project and GLSEN, while mentioned in several videos and benefitting from the exposure and revenue of the It Gets Better Project (About, n.d.), have no control over or responsibility for the videos that are included

on the site. These organisations exist in an unusual relationship with the project, and, for them, Savage does hold a measure of control in his role as curator.

In this new organisational arrangement, there is hardly a defined boundary between the It Gets Better Project site (the nuts and bolts of the project), the It Gets Better Project brand (the image and mission of the project), the participants who watch the videos, and the participants who make the videos. These pieces are part of an organic whole; the project makes little sense, and might not exist at all, without all of the pieces in play. The role of Savage, or any online community manager engaged in the project, is that of curator, exercising a bit of control over the selection and creation of the communal resource without disempowering the participants who made and watch the video content. Curators are not situated between an organisation and participants, acting as a power broker and manipulator of messages. Rather, curators are situated within and among the participants, working for the organisational mission but located—immersed—in the online community. The public relations practitioner-as-curator thus exists in a co-creative liminal space alongside the organisation and participants.

Online community management and the professionalisation of public relations

If, in today's digital landscape, "communication within networks is about *relational processes* not representational procedures" (Rossiter, 2006, p. 13), then public relations practitioners must shift their focus away from the domain of messaging and relationship management and toward the practice of curating the online community-as-resource. This has given rise to a number of new job descriptions, including 'online community manager', 'digital care manager', and 'social media strategist'. The public relations discipline would be wise to position itself at the heart of these growth areas, as indeed public relations theory and practice brings much to the table. We do not advocate an abandonment of public relations, but rather a reorientation of public relations knowledge to

better fit the contours and flows of the global mediascape (Appadurai, 1996). These new public relations roles are emblematic of this shift that is taking place whether the public relations profession is ready or not.

What does an online community manager do, exactly? Online community management is the strategic management of online communities as living resources for organisational benefit. We have already discussed how this is not a traditional conception of 'management' power, and we advocate instead that these managers, as curators, "mediate [the] experience of social information" (Hogan, 2010, p. 381). As part of organisational strategy, online community managers are seen as the organisation's eyes and ears among its participants. They serve a research and evaluation function by channelling a steady stream of real-time intelligence from the online community to the organisation's decision-makers. More importantly, though, online community managers cultivate and motivate the community membership to participate. This function is important for many new online organisations because the online community is (or directly produces) the organisation's product or service.

In a day-to-day sense, this means online community managers are constantly immersed in the flow of activity and conversation within the online community, and they also participate in online community discussions, business, and self-governance. Online community managers are transparent—the online community should know that he or she works for the organisation—but they should attempt to mingle with the online community authentically, adopting community norms, inside jokes, and colloquialisms. Because of the large amount of time online community managers are expected to invest in the day-to-day flow of an online community, which might include them staying logged on to a message board or social networking site throughout an entire work day, supervisors must redefine what it means for workers to be 'on task' and 'not distracted' by social media on the clock. The organisation must learn to see the work of online community managers as having a strategic purpose and immense benefit for the

organisation, and they must invest in the serious training of these individuals. Finally, online community managers must be empowered to act as spokespeople for the organisation and be given a reasonable amount of executive authority. This authority is a practical consideration rather than an attempt to reaffirm the ‘dominant coalition’ argument for public relations practitioners to be at the management table. Practically speaking, online community managers are the face of the organisation for the online community of participants, and their curatorial work keeps pace with the buzz of social media, which is rapid. Thus, if a participant complains about the organisation, the online community manager should be empowered to respond immediately and remedy the situation as a customer service manager might.

How are we to train online community managers, and what does this mean for the professionalisation of public relations? This is a self-reflexive question about power in our industry, and we use this discussion as a starting point for an agenda of future research on the subject. The historical roots of professionalism can be traced to the social reorientation

toward corporate capitalism and as a response, at least in part, to a crisis of identity and authority among the middle classes. ... Professionals were able to establish new sources and kinds of authority, not the least of which was their avowed autonomy within new corporate and bureaucratic structures. (Strychacz, 1993, p. 22)

Professionalism is little more than an argument for a group of people having “monopoly over...work tasks. A profession achieves such monopoly by convincing the state and the lay public that they need, and deserve, such a right” to that kind of power (Ritzer, 1975, p. 630). The public relations discipline has been obsessed with the notion of professionalism, seeing the industry’s legitimacy bound up in how ‘professional’ it can become and how quickly scholars can create theory (Hallahan, Holzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2007; McDonald &

Hebbani, 2011; Sisco, Collins & Zoch, 2011). When we train public relations students, we indoctrinate them into the profession, bestowing them with an apparatus of power to be wielded in the business and not-for-profit world. What is most striking about our proposal for a participant-curator model of public relations is perhaps that it discourages the public relations practitioner to be very powerful in the first place; the model encourages practitioners to think of themselves as endowing online community participants with power and curating participants’ energies in productive ways. To train an online community manager in this way is antithetical to professional public relations training. It is an interesting paradox worthy of future study.

Conclusion and future research

Looking forward, we sketch the following agenda for future research, in the hopes that others will test, advance, and refine the participant-curator model in light of empirical evidence.

Testing the model

We have provided a glimpse into the case of the It Gets Better Project as a way to illustrate our proposed model, but online organisations and their communities come in many species. It will be important to validate the model through additional case study research. This model may also be tested through surveys and interviews with public relations practitioners working within online communities, whether these practitioners are named, full-time online community managers or practitioners who take up many public relations duties in an organisation in which online community management is but one. Surveys and interviews with public relations practitioners at traditional brick-and-mortar organisations that have launched—successfully or not—online communities would provide valuable insight as well. Failed online communities would prove especially useful, since failed cases in public relations are not often examined or celebrated for their learning value.

Best practices research

Because no university public relations curriculum to date, to our knowledge, is

devoted to training online community managers, practitioners working in these roles are developing their own sets of best practices in ongoing, ad hoc ways, often through trial-and-error. Case studies, as well as surveys and interviews with these practitioners, could begin to capture these best practices, assemble them in a common bank of knowledge, and distil them into valuable teaching materials for students and other practitioners. Among these best practices are also stories of legal and ethical obstacles practitioners have faced along the way of building an online community, and these lessons could benefit the study and practice of public relations immensely.

Theoretical development

The participant-curator model should be refined through theoretical and philosophical essays as well as through empirical research. Shifting power, as we advocate here, results in a realignment of a number of professional and ethical public relations values, and these need to be examined closely. We also recommend the inclusion of scholarship from other disciplines in this theoretical development. Internet studies scholars, sociologists, library and information scientists, political theorists, urban planners—each of these groups have examined issues of curation, participation, engagement, and new media technology. Public relations could do better to widen its circle beyond the disciplines of communication studies, organisational communication, and journalism and mass communication in its interdisciplinary inquiry.

Teaching and learning

Training new public relations practitioners and professional development of veteran practitioners is a priority, especially as technology changes at such a rapid pace. Whereas the trade press and white papers routinely provide valuable nuggets of information about new industry developments pertaining to online-based communication, a strong theoretical linkage is lacking. As knowledge emerges through future research on the participant-curator model, it will be important to translate this knowledge to those who are most likely to put it into use in a variety of formats, preferably those with open access.

At the time of writing this essay, the very definition of public relations was being crowdsourced by the Public Relations Society of America, necessitated by the numerous changes brought about by social media, but also admittedly an exercise that the organisation has stated is long overdue (Corbett, 2012). The changes inherent within the discipline do not reside solely within social media, however, despite daily trade coverage devoted to the topic, and consideration must be extended to the tremendous power shifts taking place within the broader world of Internet communication. These power shifts should be examined first and foremost within the plethora of online communities in existence today. Through this essay, our intention is to build upon ongoing research streams regarding power in public relations and to present a rather radical argument about that state of power and control in public relations today. We hope this essay does indeed spark debate. We hope to engage our colleagues in scholarly debate about the issue and invite practitioners and researchers alike to join us in further theorising and testing the participant-curator model.

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¹ The video can be seen here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IcVyvg2Qlo>

² The works of Susan Sontag, Brian Ott, Eric Aoki, Michael Ames, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Marouf Hasian, and many others in the areas of critical museum studies, public memory, and critical rhetoric closely examine the inherent political power of monuments and museum curators. This body of work is also frequently sharply critical of colonial attitudes in the historical development of museums.