



James Mahoney, Marianne Sison and Joy Chia

An exploration of power and public relations, but surely theres more

By: James Mahoney, University of Canberra, Marianne Sison, RMIT and Joy Chia, Monash University.

That the editors decided to appear here, rather than at the top of the menu, and for each of us to write an individual perspective, says something about our journey to produce this special edition of *PRism*. It was not hard to identify the topic. After all, power is at the core of questions asked about public relations by both traditional and critical scholars. The importance of asking those questions, especially from a critical perspective, grows as professional public relations practice undergoes enormous transformation in the age of technology and from the serious impact of its use by Gen Y - - the latter as a normative way of accessing information and communicating with their networks. In this way, young practitioners are making important contributions to how public relations is done. Kevin Moloneys and Joanna Fawkes long-term critical perspectives on public relations and ethical practice, based on their professional experience and scholarly works, meant they needed to be here, so thats where we began.

What brought us to this space at the end of the edition, was agreement about what we wanted it to do (see the call for papers), and the idea that what our contributors had to say about the theme was more important than reading us introducing them. We each had our views about the power of public relations and these informed our planning discussions. For example, questions in the call for papers about power and culture, power and marginalised communities, ethics, measuring power, and power and the common good, resulted from these interactions. All the questions we asked scholars to address in their contributions to this special edition are reflected in some way here. Many have foreshadowed additional research on their topics. All they have written suggests that this edition has done what it set out to do ? explore power and public relations ? and we thank all the contributors. There must be far more to investigate and to say about this topic. We look forward to that happening.

Our own thoughts about power and how they have developed in our own life contexts are reflected in the three, brief, personal pieces that follow ? an approach we adopted from Joanna and Kevin.

This edition resulted from our submission for the 2011 *PRism* Prize, which we were delighted to win. In compiling the edition, we have had tremendous support from the journals editor, Elspeth Tilley, who refrained from wielding the undoubted power that goes to the occupant of the editorial chair thus enabling us to get on with it in our own way. We thank Elspeth for that freedom and for her continuing encouragement.

Difficult terrain on a personal journey

James Mahoney

In many years of professional practice, the notion that the organisations for which I worked held some kind of power over, or in, public discourses about policy, or action, rarely registered. We contributed, earnestly, and sometimes won a trick, even the round, but they were wins that only a liberal definition of the exercise of power would accept. Clearly, power was held and exercised elsewhere. The daily news agenda set the topics that needed to be addressed. It still does. Mostly this came from the efforts of others, sometimes opponents, and often the organisation was on the back foot, hardly a powerful position. Power over organisational communication decisions was almost always vested somewhere else ? a chief executive almost too cautious to contribute; a finance director cutting budgets and thus the capability to do things; an interventionist organisational chair demanding the pursuit of a personal agenda; and once a CEOs executive assistant, a sublime gatekeeper who took decisions about what the Boss would or would not say, and when he would say it, and rationed access to

staff and those pesky journalists who really needed nothing more than the media release. That's the realpolitik of professional practice.

All this is, of course, a simplification of a complex and dynamic profession and its role in public discourse - and perhaps too over the top, probably naive. Maybe it's even cynical. But it is a reflection on the reality of professional practice in which getting on with the job is such a daily burden that contemplating notions of power is not on the task list.

Just imagine, then, the shock of the new academic being introduced to the rich literature on public relations, power, ethics, practice and theoretical perspectives on joining academe. Especially the critical literature and the challenges it poses for practice. It was akin to that shock Sir Maurice Mawby and Sir George Fisher had when confronted in the 1970s with criticism of the mining industry they sought to build as a contributor to Australian economic growth (Mahoney, 2012). Well, almost.

Critical scholars situate professional communication in the context of social theory (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009) and this is the source of their concern about power and communication. In particular, they seek to understand how professional communication influences, and is in turn influenced by, society (see, for example, the discussion in Ihlen & van Ruler, 2009, esp. pp1-11). Moloney (2006) describes public relations campaigns as professionally self-indulgent (p. 131) and the practice as weak propaganda (p.165) because it involves a one-sided presentation of data and relies too much on press agency and asymmetrical communication. Letang (2005) notes that critical scholarship involves critiquing not only policy but professional practice, and debating strategies of domination (p. 522) that are implicit in social, economic and political structures.

This is big territory, terrain that complicates the stereotypical-and tedious-notion of public relations as spin, a negative, unethical and dangerous practice. What does spin actually mean? Why do public relations people advancing the views of business, or political parties, practice spin while those who promote charities, not-for-profits and other good causes using the same techniques and theories, do not? Why is the profession negatively framed by only one aspect of its practice, albeit an important one? Maybe all this is because ?media and all that it means is the dominant paradigm not only for professional practice, but also for communication scholarship. Maybe it is this focus on media, especially the mass news media, and recently on social media, that leads to questions about power and public relations. Are we too focussed on this and not enough on other aspects of practice and its specialisations?

It was, then, a personal journey from practitioner to academic across this difficult terrain that led to an idea for this special edition. If public relations is a ?powerful profession, one that has a privileged role in setting communication agendas, and solving problems, in business, sport, culture, and politics, as many regard it to be, what does that actually mean, and what is power in the context of public relations practice?

So, we got here because of that personal journey and I'm glad Marianne and Joy joined me in this part of it, balanced the questions, and added their scholarly insights.

The hegemony in English language scholarship

Marianne D. Sison

Let me declare that English is my second language. I was born and raised in the Philippines and by virtue of our colonial heritage, was educated in American English. My seeming competence in English skills as a young 10-year old combined with apparently some journalistic genes from an uncle who was a newspaper columnist shaped my interest in the field of mass communication. After completing my communication degree during the martial law years at the University of the Philippines (well-known as a groundswell for student activism and anti-imperialist movements against the US), I went to the US for my masters degree. Upon receiving a better mark in a writing class than my American classmate who majored in English, I thought my English was not too bad after all.

So when I arrived in Australia in 1989, I thought my English language competence along with my US credentials would give me an edge in finding work. Well it didn't. Aside from the employers standard requirement of ?local experience (whose logic baffles a new migrant applying for work the first time), I realized my lack of competence with Australian English.

More than 20 years later, my ?third language skills have slightly improved, thanks to my Australian-born sons who regularly teach me nuances of the local language. However my dilemmas with language did not stop there. Transforming a dissertation, or an idea, to a conference paper and then a journal article is something I still grapple with.

In my various roles as an academic and scholar, I often find myself guilty of perpetuating the hegemony of scholars whose first language is English. Some non-English speaking background (NESB) authors have great ideas but their expressions often reveal that English is their adopted language. To be accepted in the world of English language scholarship, scholars not only adopt the norms of the language but also the dominant perspectives in the field. Thus we find international studies exploring applications of Anglo-American concepts. Very few emerging scholars would attempt to challenge the status quo, critique the dominant perspective or offer radical ideas, thus diminishing greater opportunities to build new knowledge. Whether these reflect a lack of courage or a smart strategy to gain admission into the academy remains to be seen.

However my recent foray into postcolonial feminist scholarship might provide some explanation. As well-known postcolonial feminist scholar Gayatri Spivak (1988) argued, subalterns who want to be listened to and taken seriously must adopt the language and the thinking of the colonizer. To me, this implies that scholars with non-English speaking backgrounds need to remove themselves from their original cultural paradigms and take on a different, usually western identity, to gain acceptance in the elite publishing world. This practice of assimilation is common for many new migrants. I am no exception. But it also reveals the hegemonic power enacted in knowledge production, that is the academy and the publishing world.

So how does someone with a non-English speaking background gain ground in the elite world of academic publishing? How do these ?accented voices participate in the conversation? For me the opportunity was to agree to be a co-editor.

The power wielded in co-editing a journal can be ?exciting and can easily go to ones head especially if it has been positioned as a ?prize! Being invited as co-editor involved having to co-write the proposal, and thereafter the call for papers, then deciding which submissions go for review, which ones dont; which papers make it. Perhaps it was my seniority (read ?old) rather than my ethnicity, my willingness (or gullibility) or the ?elixir of power that led me to agree to join my esteemed colleagues Jim and Joy in this endeavour. But I had a different view of power.

Coming from a country whose People Power revolution in 1986 was a precursor to the recent Arab Spring protests, I believe power can be used to do the right thing, to advocate for good, and to engender change. As such, I propose reorienting Bergers (2005) ?power to dimension to a ?power from. This reorientation shifts the locus of control to the publics, rather than the organization or dominant coalition, and acknowledges the view that power can, and maybe should, come from below. For this to occur however, the marginalized, the subaltern, the ?other, needs to take advantage of opportunities that are offered.

But with that power comes responsibility. How do we manage and balance the need to give a voice to brilliant NESB scholars with the need to conform to the conventions of the western-dominated publishing? How do we ensure that we help build new knowledge in public relations scholarship and ensure the integrity of *PRism* **Longing for broader, deeper discussion**

Joy Chia

As Marianne talked about scholars adopting the norms of language? English as the norm (which was rarely spoken in my home for the first ten years of my life, and not spoken at all when I lived with my Asian in-laws for 3 years), she reflected on the dominant perspectives in the field being Anglo. I was reviewing a doctoral dissertation on public relations in Vietnam and realized how much I longed for extensions of scholarship that take us beyond ?western perspectives. When the papers were submitted for this special edition on power in public relations I was keen to consider perspectives from scholars around the world, and extend the body of knowledge from Asian scholars in our region. I wanted to gain a better understanding of power in cultures where public relations was evolving, ?finding itself and shaping its mode of practice. Ali Al- Kandari and Kenn Gaithers (2011) reference to power and gender as inherent in the patriarchal societal structure and the Arab social system which favours those with prestige (p.273), in their study of Arabs, the west and public relations (p.266) alerted me to cultural variations in the way public relations is understood, practised and developed in different cultures- their research was fascinating.

I returned to my doctoral students analysis of the shape of Vietnamese public relations as her qualitative research indicated that Vietnamese public relations was carried out in ways that ?the west might not understand (Van, 2011). It seemed easy, initially, to assume that in a country where the government controls the media, influences what can be promoted and controls policy, that public relations practitioners might have very little power, rather they may be powerless. When I looked more closely at the Vietnamese culture and began to understand what is central to the way public relations is carried out, ?relational empowerment became evident ? by this I mean that it is in, and through the mix of personal and business relationships that practitioners gain respect and develop relationships that empower them and make them influential. What they communicate, and how they influence key publics reflects the relational context central to Vietnamese culture. With journalists, for

example, Vietnamese public relations practitioners spend considerable time getting to know journalists families, knowing every detail about their birthdays and special occasions, sharing meals and many cups of coffee. Practitioners reach a point where they take an active role in promoting and communicating the messages important to their organisations and journalists report their stories verbatim as they trust their communication source. Vietnamese practitioners described their role as journalists, empowering them to take an active role in communicating to the public. For scholars such as Sriramesh (2009) practitioners and journalists/media relationships are critical to public relations in many parts of the world, and no doubt the focus on relationships shaping public relations, evident in other parts of Asia (see for example Hung, 2007) is receiving attention in ongoing research. Yet, in the Vietnamese study, and in anecdotal accounts from my graduates working in Vietnam, international public relations practitioners struggle with the way personal-business relationships in that country frame professional work- they also struggle with the ethics of giving gifts to family members, not just the journalists, and they often resist these practices. Some international consultancies have moved out of Vietnam as they could not function in that environment. This seems to reflect international practitioners going to a country to undertake PR in the way they perceive it should be carried out ? they think they have the mandate, the power to do so, or they are the public relations experts coming to lead public relations in a new, fast growing economy.

I see Asia developing and marvel at the huge growth of public relations in China and South East Asia but I also want to see much more research that develops a body of knowledge reflecting cultural peculiarities, informing, educating visiting and resident practitioners thereby contributing to the legitimacy of practice in respective regions. I see that empowerment of practitioners and their publics is part of an acknowledgment of cultural variances; and for a profession that focuses so much on relationships ?relational empowerment provides a way forward for collaborative meaningful practice no matter where you are practising public relations.

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