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Can theories of power help us understand public relations better?

By

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Looking at 40 years of public relations in the UK, I note the following. In the 1960s, PR was a growing fashion of mass persuasion and it was declared to be about ‘goodwill and mutual understanding’ between organisations and their publics. This was the official language of PR about itself, and I remember no queries from colleagues – or myself. It was the official line. There wasn’t much academic thinking or writing in the 60s, 70s and much of the 80s, for PR had no campus presence in the UK. That changed in the late 1980s for then there was a body of theory to give it conceptual shape and British HE institutions to teach it. It was the paradigm associated with the thinking of the American academic James Grunig, with its hierarchy of bad PR (the lies and gross exaggerations of press agency) at the bottom and virtuous PR (respectful dialogue, seeking mutually agreed outcomes) at the top.

I don’t know who first brought the Grunigian paradigm to these shores, so to speak, but I’m sure that Stirling University had a leading role in its import here. For me, one thing soon grated about its presence: its widespread, uncritical acceptance. At this point enter Jacqui L’Etang and Madga Pieczka. They developed a critical view about the paradigm and other aspects of PR in two books (1996 and 2006) edited by them, and in many other publications. It is widely acknowledged among the 50 or so British academics who teach and research PR that Jacqui and Madga are our leading scholars in the discipline, and given their

independence of thinking in the face of an intellectual monopoly it is fair to say that they have established a Scottish School of Public Relations. Thank you Jacqui and Magda for the example to follow!

Given what I have just said, I will still maintain that we in the UK owe a debt of pedagogic gratitude to James Grunig for he gave us PR teachers and researchers something to mentally bite on. So it may seem ungenerous for me to say that we need to move on to a post-Grunigian view. But I will go on and there are others on similar journeys. Where to go is at the core of this seminar. I have a definite compass bearing for the journey. It is the need to place power at the centre of any comprehensive account of PR in pluralist, liberal democracies with competitive markets and vigorous civil societies. Grunig's paradigm privileges the qualities of communicative relationships between entities as his first order evaluator. (Are they honest; are they symmetrical in outcomes?) I argue that other qualities are expressions of a more fundamental relationship between social entities: the relationships of dominants and subordinates, of principals and subalterns. For me, power relations amongst social groupings are the major determinants of communicative relations.

First, I bring into our discussion the work of James Scott who wrote *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) and his idea of public and private transcripts in the relations of dominant and subordinate groups in a society. In an extreme example of his transcript idea, he says that slaves and masters in the American South talked to each other in two modes (pp.1-15): the public transcripts of the masters justified their ownership of people and the private one complained about slave attitudes of deep resentment and incipient revolt; the public transcripts of slaves spoke of sullen obedience, while the private one was of injustice and

rage.<sup>1</sup> He also gives examples of class relations from French society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; from George Elliot's novel *Adam Bede* in 19<sup>th</sup> century England; and of race relations in colonised Burma in the 1920s observed by George Orwell. Scott's thesis is that there are two narratives (that's my word from now on for his word 'transcripts') in the relations between powerful groups and marginalised ones, and that the private narrative (transcript) is nearly always inaccessible to outsiders. It is marked by truthful statements which cannot be said publicly because of fear of consequences.

I analyse social relations amongst organisations and groups principally in power terms where power is 'power over' and 'power to'. I therefore cannot avoid the question – do PR people write public narratives for their organisations and groups and are there influential private narratives in the background? Do they write for powerful organisations (big businesses; hospitals; the police; regulatory bodies, religious bodies), and for subordinate organisations (SMEs; trade unions; pressure groups for refugees; transsexuals etc)? They do but these examples show a limitation in my transfer of Scott's idea to PR: he built his 'transcripts' idea on very stark examples of dominant/subordinate relationships. Witness his extensive referencing of slavery. The power gap in PR is much narrower but it has varying widths even so. It may be quite broad in some cases (Tesco and local food suppliers) and narrower in others (BA and the cabin crew in the T&G trade union). But I maintain that there is enough power differential in PR relationships for there to be private and public narratives, and hence for the core relationship between message sender and receiver to be a struggle for communicative advantage. Another limitation of my transfer of Scott's idea is that in

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<sup>1</sup> Scott notes the term 'hush arbor' (p.xi) as a secret social space where slaves could talk freely.

some circumstances (e.g. private lobbying) the public and private narratives become one, but more work is needed on that elision.

I have trawled my experience of PR for examples of the two narratives at work, and have strong memories. I have mostly worked for dominant groups (big business; public bodies; universities) and I know that my press releases never said negative things or even slightly critical things about the glass products, the tourism offerings, the education they were offering. My memory of these exclusions from PR statements, these private narratives, is strong for they decided the inclusions - what went into the press releases. These exclusions were half of the conversation amongst internal people. In PR, you often know what to say because you know what you can't say. Or what you are told you can't say. I also remember private narratives shaping media releases for the subordinate institutions I have supported (a trade union and a credit union).

If James Scott writes about types of narratives about power, John Scott (2001) writes about the tone of voice different sorts of power use in public narrative. He distinguishes between corrective and persuasive power, the first dominating through constraint and the second through discursion (2001, p.16). He borrows from Pareto and gives an anthropomorphic characterisation to these two styles of domination. Thus there are 'lions' and 'foxes' correcting subordinates and there are 'owls' and 'bears' persuading subordinates. I think we can transfer these characterisations to public relations narratives. For example, the owls dominate through expertise and I hear the expert tone in messages from health education bodies, food standards people, the climate change lobby. These narratives have high source credibility with many professors and doctors doing the talking. There are references to the truth of scientific

data and appeals to values such as good health, healthy eating and harmony with nature. ‘Bears’ on the other hand have an authoritative but benign tone of insistence and certainty. You hear it when politicians say that ‘there is no alternative’ or when business people say that they had to close down the factory but that they regretted making you redundant. We can hear the tones of the ‘lions’ (messages from our army in Basra; public information at the time of terrorist attacks) and the ‘foxes’ (the seducers, the manipulators, the deceivers of the public) – I will leave you to fill in with your own examples.

I also note that we can allocate these tones of narratives to Grunig’s press agency, public information and two-way asymmetrical models of PR. So what’s my point? Well, I’m specifically relating PR to John Scott’s ‘developed forms of powers’ (p. 16) while Grunig relates it to dialogic symmetries. I always put power relations at the core of public communications in the political economy and civil society.

Apart from the two Scotts (they are not related), the third author to investigate for ideas about power transferable to PR is Stephen Lukes. His three ‘dimensions’ of power can be summarised as noticeable conflict among interests; controlling agendas for public debate and policy making; and third, conditioning the beliefs and thoughts of others. Lukes (1974) associated these three ‘dimensions’ (his word) with decreasing levels of public visibility of the power exercised. More power is associated with less visibility of it. The visibility levels can be associated, I argue, with different PR types and these different types can be called the visible, the indeterminate, and the invisible levels of public relations.

Lukes' first dimension of power and my most visible public relations type is the public contest between, say, a business and a trade union; a business threatened with take-over; and the pro-hunting and anti-hunting groups. The media releases, interviews, stunts, protest marches are very visible.

Lukes' second dimension of power is about controlling policy agendas; and my corresponding level of PR visibility – an indeterminate one - is lobbying. It is 'indeterminate' because it is often hard for those observing to know when it takes place. Lobbying is direct personal influence on policy makers and often happens in private. It seeks to create a policy bias in its favour, and so actively shapes the political agenda in a hidden way. Do we know how many times Rupert Murdoch and Tony Blair have met and what they talked about or agreed? These meetings, I argue, created bias to shape agendas, and this bias is the central feature of Luke's second dimension. Lobbying, of course, is done by most interests and groups in a liberal democracy and as such its consequence, the mobilisation of bias to shape agendas, is not a concern specifically related to business, as in Murdoch's case. For example, trade unions seek to create bias in public agenda, but many of the meetings and outcomes are known about. As is the lobbying by pensioners, environmentalists, and church leaders (over adoption by gay couples). It is this melange of visible/invisible meetings and known/unknown outcomes which leads me to use the term 'indeterminate visibility'.

In a representative democracy, this mobilisation of bias is a constant aim of all interests and groups; it can be seen as a constant state of searching for extra resource, and can be viewed benignly for democracy when all who want to speak can do so. However, it is the

amount of mobilised bias generated privately via PR lobbying by the single most powerful interest in a liberal democracy (business) which makes for concern. Business, as a set of ideas and as a practice, is so constitutive of known liberal democracy that it has structural power to affect the circumstances in which it operates. This power is Lukes' third dimension. It is the power of dominant groups to condition the thinking of others.<sup>2</sup> It is the power to keep conflict latent in situations where there is '... a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the *real interests* of those they exclude. . .', even when the excluded may not express or be conscious of their interests (pp. 24-5). Lukes calls this a fully sociological form of power: 'Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?' (p. 23). Personally, it is a frightening thought that PR contributes to this social condition. In his second edition (2005, p. 116), Lukes attributes this compliance to failures of rationality, and explicitly mentions, *inter alia*, 'experts in communication and public relations' as producers of these failures.

I argue here and elsewhere (Moloney, 2006) that PR is an agent producing this third dimension, this invisible type of power. PR is a communicative agent of structural power in that it produces messages which are both visible and hidden; which have an intended, undeclared conditioning effect on their consumers with the aim of maintaining existing institutions. Messages from elites condition others into thinking that their contents are the natural order and are 'common sense'

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<sup>2</sup> A Mori/FT poll, June 2003, gave out that 11% of the general public trusted 'directors of large companies' to tell the truth. 80% did not. In a February 2003 poll, business leaders came 16<sup>th</sup> out of 19 in a list of people to be trusted to tell the truth. The figures were given by Stewart Lewis, MORI director, on 20.2.04, at the 'Trust in the Age of Suspicion' conference, Miramar Hotel, Bournemouth, organised by the Centre for Public Communications Research, Bournemouth University.

(McLellan 1979, p. 185; John Scott 2001. pp. 89-91). The PR messages are visible but their effects are invisible. The messages do not report conflict; their contents are not egregious; rather they are about what is perceived in majority public opinion as a natural arrangement, as common sense. Examples are market relationships between institutions (rather than co-operative ones); monarchical relations (rather than republican ones), and resource exploitative relations by humans with natural resources (rather than sustainable ones). In the vernacular, we express these relations with the phrase 'it's the way things are'. Historically, I think of religious, confessional relations as a dominant mode over people, now gone from super-ordinate power because of the rise of secular relations between people. This last example shows that some dominant/subordinate relationships change over time. This possibility of change is stated by Lukes in his second edition (2005). He describes this power to make social arrangements unthinkingly accepted as 'the power to mislead (p.149) but notes that it is 'always partial and limited' and is 'always focused on particular experience and is never . . . more than partially effective' (p. 150).

I argue elsewhere (Moloney 2006) that these relationship shifts are aided by PR, and it is fitting this year to mention that the campaign to abolish slave trading involved activities which we recognise as ours – logos; slogans; lobbying; petitions, press releases<sup>3</sup>. I find this historical example of 200 hundred years ago instructive for us today. I hope it gives a fillip to the reputation of modern PR. I hope that it reminds us, and the public, that PR can be used to serve the interests of the most enlightened as well as the most degraded of causes. Seeing PR as the communicative

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<sup>3</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6476645.stm> Accessed 24.3.07.

expression of power relations has helped me to come to this conclusion.  
Do you think it can help you?

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