Can theories of power help us understand public relations better?

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After thanking James Grunig for providing an architecture for thinking about public relations (PR) for 25 years, more academics should now consider questions of reassessing his formidable intellectual legacy. This seems timely, for with his retirement there is a generational change among PR thinkers and some colleagues, especially American and Australasian, have started the reassessment [1].

I am drawn to the feasibility of putting ideas of power relations, instead of concepts of communicative symmetry, at the heart of a descriptive explanation of PR in pluralist, liberal democracies with competitive markets and vigorous civil societies. Grunig's paradigm has turned the academic gaze too quickly towards communication studies. The task is to turn it, instead, to political studies, particularly towards pluralism and interest intermediation [2].

Grunig in his first three categories fits in with such a power-centric approach, but his fourth category is a normative one and it privileges the qualities of symmetrical communicative relationships between entities as an evaluator of excellence. Are PR messages amongst entities true, respectful, negotiable; are they dialogic; do they

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[1] See Gower (2006).

[2] This turn takes the argument away from Foucault but one way back to his work could be via his 'power relations' concept of power, and his fusion of 'power' and 'knowledge' into the one notion of 'power/knowledge' (Hodgson 2000. pp. 41 and 45). PR, it can be argued, is a category of knowledge production and/or distribution.

produce symmetrical advantage and disadvantage for senders and receivers? If PR lacks these qualities, it is deformed. It has been perverted from its essence of two-way symmetry. I find these positions a second order explanation of PR, suggestive of a deeper one. The Grunigian fourth category needs to be removed to show the fundamentals on which it rests.

Instead of focusing on communicative symmetry, I want to explore the relationships of dominants and subordinates, of principals and subalterns in politics, markets, and civil society and whether they explain PR messaging[3]. I start with three assumptions. They are:

1) PR messages are communicative (symbolic) expressions of the power status of their senders in their relations with stronger and weaker competitors and co-operators. For example, in a take-over battle between businesses, the factual content and narrative structure of the messages, and the denotations and connotations of their words are rooted in the state of the contest over power gains and losses experienced by the sender. We correctly say that PR message senders have 'a strong' or 'a weak hand' in these contests.

2) PR messages are produced as a contribution (alongside material, financial, legal and marketing contributions) communication makes to the contest for more resources. Resources are quantifiable manifestations of power and are material, ideological, psychological, or reputational in form. So, for example, products, promoted with adverts and marketing PR, are launched to increase the resource of more market share. If the products thrive, these resources of more production, more revenue and more profit are business power. We correctly say that successful businesses have more power than less successful ones. I argue, therefore, that knowing how powerful or unpowerful PR message senders are, and what more power they seek in any set of stakeholder relationships will tell us why messages are sent; how they are

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[3] I use the nouns 'messages' and 'messaging' as short referents to all PR activity.

constructed, and what effects they are likely to have on the power relations of the sender.

3) My third assumption is that while power causes PR messaging in the very great majority of its uses, PR messaging becomes a resource and therefore an expression of power when it is responded to by the public as continuous compliance. This is PR as the power of the most extreme form of one-way messaging, propaganda, and this PR propaganda is a component of what Lukes has termed sociological power (1975, 2005. See below.) This is PR as a continuous, often unnoticed, conditioner of public opinion and behaviour. This third assumption of PR as power effect and power cause is a danger to my thesis for it makes power and PR both cause and effect of each other. There is an incoherence here and my management of it as an exceptional case requires more work.

I note some characteristics of my assumptions. They concentrate on PR message senders in their network of power relationships with their stakeholders. They do not concentrate on message receivers and my thinking only engages with them when they in turn are message senders in their bilateral and multilateral relations with other stakeholders. My tentative theory is not normative for it is a value-neutral methodology of analysis: instead positive values and truths – or their opposites – come from the intentions and consequences of sending PR messages as power-caused and power-causing communication.[4] I reduce the exposure of PR people to values and truth when I characterise them and their work as technical agency (human and functional) servicing the power needs of their principals inside organisations and groups [5]. Another characteristic is that power

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[4] I do, however, argue elsewhere (Moloney 2006) for a normative theory of communicative equality in liberal democracies. i.e. that PR, a set of communication techniques neutral in themselves as regards values, should happen in conditions of communicative equality where all who wish to use it have a threshold minimum of resources to do so effectively.

[5] There is a subsidiary problem of learnt helplessness conditioning the behaviour of PR people in their role of technical agents. It concerns excessive passivity before the messages which they are instructed to publish. It raises ethical issues (e.g. 'I follow the client's/boss's brief. I do what my superiors tell me'.) which are noted but not discussed here.

reproduces itself in one of two ways, either via the control and command of resources or alternatively via persuasive capacity to gain voluntary access to the same resources. I also note that I approach power concepts from an institutional and group perspective with an emphasis on pluralism and interest intermediation. More sociological perspectives which focus on individuals, knowledge production in society, and power relations need to be examined. Finally, my assumptions are social Darwinian in that they categorise communicative relations as a form of adaptation to a competitive environment in the struggle to survive by organisations and groups.

I want to make the body of this article an examination of three authors who have written about power and of whether their ideas can be useful for my tentative power-centric theory of PR. But first I make a detour to look at my central concept. When we say 'power' we flinch because it is a word with connotations of force, of command and control (power over). I do include these extreme and threatening expressions of power (working for the armed forces, the police, the administration of justice), but I gather in also other, more benign expressions which come within the same category of 'power over'. I mean power as persuasion (in business, public service and civil society PR). Examples are public information campaigns to correct behaviour (smoking and alcohol consumption). These two expressions of 'power over' (corrective and persuasive categories: see John Scott below) underlie much of the social relations of the political economy and of civil society – in retail markets between supermarkets and small suppliers; amongst pressure groups competing on policy and fund raising; amongst churches and their dissenters; amongst football clubs competing for players, and in the relations between emergency services and flooded out families. These are examples of power as the transformative capacity of an agent to make their preferences prevail.

I'm also including in the phrase 'power relationships' relationships of another kind: of the 'power to' kind which are about capacity and enablement[6]. For example, the capacity of Greenpeace to attract media attention, raise funds, and buy ships to harass whalers; or the capacity of humanitarian campaigning groups to enthuse supporters and recruit new ones. Greenpeace have the capacity to generate enough ideological appeal and/or attractive action via campaigns to attract extra resources of members, funds, policy maker support. Remember their campaign against the Brent Spar.

Detour over and now back to authors whose writings I want to look at because they help us argue through to the centrality of power to PR. 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 resentful obedience and passive acceptance, while the private one was of injustice and rage.[7] He also gives examples of class relations from French society in the 19th century; from George Elliot's novel *Adam Bede* in 19th 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'[8]) in the relations between powerful groups and

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[6] Berger (2005) links 'power over' relations as one of the ways in which dominant coalitions have PR relations with others. Another way is 'power with'.

[7] Scott notes the term 'hush arbor' (p.xi) as a secret social space where slaves could talk freely.

[8] Goffman's distinction between' back' and' front regions' in the presentation of an individual for daily work (1972, pp.109-140) appears to have similarity with the translation of Scott's private and public transcripts idea into the concept of private and public narratives in PR. But the similarity is perhaps limited for Goffman writes (preface) about the performance of individuals in non-mediated work circumstances, i.e. 'any concrete social establishment', and while this condition could apply to private lobbying, it could not apply to media relations. Separately, Goffman does note (p.14) that presentations by individuals include deceitful and feigned misinformation.

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.

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; transsexual groups seeking power)? They do, for PR is used by the most and the least powerful organisations and groups 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 in a white supremacist, settler society. Witness his referencing of slavery. The power gap in PR in our societies is much, much narrower but there are still noticeable varying widths of command and control and of transformative capacity to achieve ends. 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 modern 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 – but I think not a sustainable one - of my transfer of Scott's idea to PR is that in some circumstances (e.g. private lobbying and employer and trade union negotiations) the public and private narratives become one. They do merge because often in these circumstances, the balance of power in relationships is in equilibrium. The sides can speak without reservation, knowing they have equal resources of retaliation and sanction. This circumstance of equal power illustrates that the distinction between public and private narratives does not exist when power status of competitive PR message senders is the same. When there is a power imbalance, there are two narratives because the imbalance leads to

aggressive and defensive competitive actions of all types (including PR) to increase, decrease the power gap. To return to James Scott's slavery example, I would bet that in modern South Africa, there are many fewer public/private discourses than in the former apartheid, racist state.

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 the British army in Basra; public information at the time of terrorist attacks, real and suspected in London; and police messaging to residents in flooded towns). We can listen to the 'foxes' (the seducers, the manipulators, the deceivers of the public) – but I will leave you to fill in with your own examples.

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. Their 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 (e.g. over adoption by gay couples). It is this melange of visible/invisible meetings and therefore

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[9]; 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. Berger (2005, p.6) notes the connection and its bias to business: 'There is little doubt that public relations has effectively served capitalism and powerful economic producers for many years, but whether it has served or can serve stakeholders and society as well from inside or outside the dominant coalition is a contested issue'.

Business, as a set of ideas and as a practice, is so constituative 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.[10] 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). It is this undeclared, unnoticed

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[9] It is hard to think of interests and groups which do not seek more support. The author suggested Cisterian Monks to students and they found a monastery with a promotional website seeking applicants and sales of organic food.

[10] Structural power maintains unpopular groups in their elite positions. 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 16th 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.

process of producing ideological compliance via sociological PR and via private lobbying which leads me to equate Lukes' third dimension of power to invisible PR.

If you teach PR, it is sobering thought that your subject contributes to this category of social compliance. One way to assuage unease is to argue for a set of societal conditions where compliance does the least damage to democracy. Lukes makes this search by us PR academics more needed when we read in his second edition (2005, p. 116) that he attributes compliance to failures of rationality, and explicitly mentions, *inter alia*, 'experts in communication and public relations' as producers of these failures. He slightly reduces our concern when he describes this power of compliance to reproduce social arrangements 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).

What I am exploring in this paper is the possibility of theories of power taking the place of theories of communication as better primary explanations of PR. I argue that 'power over' and 'power to' in the social relations of organisations and groups determine the intentions behind, and the framing of, PR messages by their producers. PR is the communicative expression of power relations as they are now or as they are wanted to be. I also argue that this constitution of PR messages by power operates at all levels of dominance and subordination, and is done by all categories of organisations and groups. It is usual to quote macro and systemic examples such as PR's role in the generation of market relationships between institutions (rather than co-operative ones); in sustaining monarchical relations (rather than republican ones) between state and citizens, and its role in exploitative relations towards natural resources (rather than sustainable ones).

But I want to add more micro and particular examples. Charities call for the reformation of various ills to empower the poor and abused.

Trade unions campaign for more power over employers to redistribute income towards labour and to circumscribe management's discretion. Marketing directors announce lower prices in order to increase market share and revenue take. Fashion houses send the PR message from the catwalk to increase market share via brand recognition. Tennis clubs fight parking restrictions outside their courts to attract more members and their fees.

These examples illustrate that PR is not only about the maintenance of existing power allocations in society but also about intentions of PR producers to increase their allocations. The examples tell us that the power of businesses, public institutions, and of civil society institutions change over time. We see Lukes's point about dominant institutions achieving only partial and ineffective compliance when we think of the decreased power of candlestick makers, trades unions, and churches, and the rise in power of new business sectors, the changing influence of cause groups (few environmental ones existed before 1960). These cases let us look at PR produced by the totally extinguished, the partially impotent and the newly potent.

I want to end on an optimistic note about PR as a technical function servicing the causal agents of *benign* social relations. It is fitting in 2007 to mention that the campaign to abolish slave trading involved activities which we recognise as ours – logos; slogans; lobbying; petitions, press releases[11]. We find this historical example of 200 hundred years ago instructive and inspiring today. The abolition of British slave trading, and of slave owning in 1833 prompts us to think of a methodology for analysing power-centric PR. It reminds us again of James Scott's distinction between private and public narratives. I think that we can make it a feature of how to do an analysis. The difference between the two narratives is a measure of what message makers do not want to say publicly because disclosure of the private narrative would reveal strengths or weaknesses in their ability to make their

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[11] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6476645.stm Accessed 24.3.07.

preferences prevail or not. Can we take amounts of disclosure as proxies for strong and weak positions?

I suggest that Lukes can help us as well. We could take the visibility index of his power dimensions and make them benchmarks. For example, public displays of PR messaging would indicate that a public power contest was happening; evidence of lobbying would tell us a more private contest was under way to change policy while PR which conditioned beliefs and behaviour would indicate ideological challenge and maintenance in society. Outlining a methodology makes the difficulties evident and the effort to solve them will only be worthwhile if it is judged that there is a basic validity to centring power in our thinking about PR.

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