

# PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORY AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY

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## Introduction

In the past decade or so, much intellectual energy has been expended defining public relations and developing a base of theoretical knowledge that would “differentiate public relations from other professions and academic disciplines” (Botan and Hazleton 1989, 13). In 1989, the first volume of *The Public Relations Research Annual* was published; in 1992, the annual became a quarterly publication called *Journal of Public Relations Research. Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* collects essays that the editors claim define the first general theory of public relations — a theory that integrates the many theories and research results existing in the field (Grunig 1992, 2).

So far, the majority of current research in public relations theory is concerned with defining the field and setting forth various models of the relationship between the organisation and its publics. Perhaps because the study of public relations is closely linked to its practice — in which, of course, the strategic interests of the organisation are of primary importance — most public relations research also places the organisation in the centre and focuses on the ways that the organisation can better communicate with and respond to the individuals and groups who are defined as its publics.

Very little work has attempted to place either public relations practice or research in a broader context. Although the important role of public relations in a democratic society is ritualistically invoked by practitioners, textbook authors, and researchers, I have found little evidence that public relations theorists have explored what that role might be or how it might change in various situations. Botan and Hazleton do not address the implications of social and political theory in their analysis of the role of theory in public relations and instead employ a concept of metatheory that is concerned pri-

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marily with questions of data collection and analysis (Botan and Hazleton 1989, 5). *Social, Political, and Economic Contexts in Public Relations: Theory and Cases* (Culbertson et al. 1993) develops a framework for analysing how the strategic needs of the client organisation fit within its environment but does not address the broader issue of the social, political, and economic contexts of public relations practice more generally.

In other words, the dominant paradigm of public relations research is either client-oriented or based in social scientific approaches — most often in systems theory or functionalism — that shy away from discussions of value and do not examine the structural conditions within which the organisation exists.

Many researchers and practitioners argue that because of its growing use of social scientific research, the practice of public relations has now developed a theoretical base that allows it to be considered a profession and therefore suggest that it has moved beyond the craft tradition that it shared with journalism (Hazleton and Botan 1989). Ironically, however, the practice of journalism is supported by a well established tradition of media scholarship and criticism that explicitly connects (and critiques) media practice with broad cultural, social, and political theories, in particular with democratic theory (for example, Siebert et al. 1956; Bennett 1982; McQuail 1994). The public journalism movement explicitly sets out a standard of media performance directly connected to democratic values (Charity 1995). That sort of research and criticism is, for the most part, missing from the public relations literature today.

This article offers (1) a critique of current public relations research and theory focusing on its neglect of democratic theory and (2) an analysis of the unexamined assumptions about society on which it relies. It pays particular attention to the two-way symmetrical model and issues management. The article ends with two suggestions for connecting public relations research with democratic theory. Throughout the article I rely on David Held's overview and analysis of democratic theory in *Models of Democracy* to criticise and explore the ideas of democracy implied in public relations research.

## The Symmetrical Model and the Troublesome Issue of Power

At first glance, James Grunig's conceptualisation of four models of public relations seems to reflect concerns about the role of public relations in a democratic society. As Grunig continues his argument for a "symmetrical" model of public relations practice, which has as its goal "mutual understanding" between the organisation and the public, he has expanded his analysis of the "world views" that lie behind both public relations research and practice (Grunig and White 1992). Although his discussion of world views begins to explore the larger context of public relations work, it is severely limited by its primary focus on public relations literature. When Grunig does link his analysis with work outside of public relations in order to construct a theory of "excellent public relations," his interest is in rhetoric and psychology.

Grunig acknowledges but does not engage critical perspectives on public relations research and practice that place it within a broader theoretical perspective. Most significantly, he does not refer normative democratic theory, which would seem to be an obvious and necessary body of literature for what he claims is a normative theory of public relations research. The theory of "excellent public relations" that emerges from

this work focuses on “ethical individual” and organisational behaviour and is therefore not explicitly connected to broader views of a good society.

Currently, the dominant model for public relations work assumes a pluralistic society. The conditions for a classic pluralism model include a diverse range of interest groups seeking political influence and a government that mediates and adjudicates between demands (Held 1987, 204). Structural differences in power is not a feature of the classic pluralism model, and as Held outlines,

*In the pluralist account, power is non hierarchically and competitively arranged. It is an inextricable part of an endless process of bargaining, between numerous groups representing different interests, for example, business organisations, trade unions, political parties, ethnic groups, students (Held 1987, 189).*

Consistent with classic pluralism, Grunig’s preferred symmetric model of public relations does not address the power issue. Rather, in the symmetric model, organisations and their publics are represented freely and equally negotiating or bargaining as they pursue their interests.

Much public relations research (including Grunig 1992) cites the work of political scientist Robert Dahl, whose work in the 1950s and 1960s provided empirical support for a pluralistic account of American society in which multiple groups compete for power, with no one group becoming dominant for long. However, for the past ten years or so, Dahl himself has argued that the conditions of pluralism do not exist.

*Ownership and control contribute to the creation of great differences among citizens in wealth, income, status, skills, information, control over information and propaganda, access to political leaders. (...) After all due qualifications have been made, differences like these help in turn to generate significant inequalities among citizens in their capacities and opportunities for participating as political equals in governing the state (Dahl 1985, 55).*

Democracy, as it is interpreted in the United States, exists within a socio-economic system that privileges the claims of business and other powerful institutions. Therefore, pluralism is not an accurate or useful description of the society.

As Dahl and other political scientists have become more and more concerned with the issue of power, the pluralist model of democracy, according to Held, has essentially collapsed. In its place is a “neopluralism” that retains the focus on competing groups, but acknowledges the serious and long term resource inequalities that effectively deny equal participation to many groups (Held 1987, 204).

With “neopluralism” as the grounding, the symmetric model of public relations becomes increasingly problematic — and much of the public relations research literature seems curiously out-of-date. As other social sciences have moved toward developing a broader understanding of power, most public relations researchers have remained loyal to a systems orientation that virtually ignores it<sup>1</sup>.

The focus on Grunig’s four models, which has dominated the research literature, has done little to make connections to broader social theory. The models are concerned with relationships between organisations and publics, not with the role of public relations as a practice within a broader context. The symmetrical model then becomes a normative model for individual practitioners in particular situations, not a normative theory of the role of public relations within a democratic society.

## Issues Management: The Uses and Abuses of John Dewey

The area of public relations that seems most obviously in need of analysis in light of democratic theory is the growing field of issues management, the co-ordinated efforts of (mostly corporate) institutions to influence public policy. Early theorists or proponents of issues management, Jones and Chase, provide the rationale:

*In our pluralistic society, public policy is the result of interaction between public and private points of view. The corporation, as an institution, has every moral and legal right to participate in formation of public policy — not merely to react or be responsive, to policies designed by government (cited in Crable and Vibbert 1985, 3).*

In their own refinement and advancement of issues management, Crable and Vibbert explain its foundation. Government makes policy, while citizens and business have the right to try to influence policy.

*What is clear is that “citizens” and “business” have no co-equal authority. What they do have is influence, and that influence affects dramatically the authority of government to do its work (Crable and Vibbert 1985, 4).*

Aggressive issues management, they claim, “can permit an organisation with no actual authority, to influence public policy” (Crable and Vibbert 1985, 4). This statement is stunning first, in its easy assertion that democratic citizens do not have authority for public policy making, and second, in its equation of the rights of institutions — usually corporations — with those of individuals. Citizens **do** delegate their authority to an elected government, but no model of democracy, no matter how limited its view of individual participation, asserts that citizens do not hold the final authority. The Supreme Court **has** upheld the rights of corporations to express views on public issues, but those rights are not unlimited and do not equate to citizen authority in governance.

Corporate issues management strategies go beyond simply working to manage and control the developing public issues that affect the organisation. Crable and Vibbert argue for what they call the “catalytic strategy” in which the corporation works to create the conditions for the emergence of issues (and their resolution) that will positively affect their long-term prosperity. In this model of issues management, the corporation — rather than citizens — sets the issues agenda.

The goal of successful issues management, write Crable and Vibbert (1985, 13), is to initiate policy. This, of course, cannot be done **directly** by groups without policy authority, but it can be done indirectly by groups with policy influence.”

This statement stands in stark contrast to John Dewey's and other democratic theorists, insistence that citizens (and not business organisations) must act to direct public policy, not simply to influence or ratify government actions.

The increasingly active role of business in public policy-making is a subject of serious concern (Gandy 1992; Greider 1992; Phillips 1994). The criticism centres on the extraordinary economic power that corporations — as opposed to individual citizens or even non corporate interest groups — have at their disposal to influence how issues are framed and resolved. Greider provides a number of examples of successful corporate issues management strategies that he argues have left our public policy process a “mock democracy.” Public relations practitioners and researchers may not agree with Greider and other critics' interpretations of issues management practices, but they

cannot ignore the implications of contemporary practice and the widespread public perception that business and other economic interest groups wield too much power in policy making.

The problematic connection between public relations practice and democratic ideals ironically becomes even more clear in the work of proponents of the symmetrical model. In her chapter on activist groups in the volume *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, Larissa Grunig explores the literature on how organisations deal with active publics. Grunig argues that organisations must listen to and learn from the activist groups and furthermore must be open to change and compromise, but she cannot avoid using language that betrays the fundamental nature of public relations practice. Active publics are threats to an organisation — most often assumed to be a business. Her goal is to find

*critical ways in which businesses and even the smallest of groups can listen to each other and share responsibility for decisions that affect all of society. The self-interest of the organisation, though, is in retaining or enhancing its autonomy from the pressure of the activist group* (Grunig 1992, 504; bolds added).

Although she claims that most issues management programs unwisely adopt an asymmetrical model, she, like Crable and Vibbert, argues for a proactive stance that will minimise the consequences to the organisation by addressing the issue early. Protection of the strategic interests of the organisation — assumed to be a business — is paramount.

That view stems directly from James Grunig's version of John Dewey's ideas about the public, which he developed at length in his book, *The Public and its Problems* (1927). Grunig (1992) cites Dewey as he develops his much-adopted typology of publics: latent publics, which face a similar problem but do not yet detect it; aware publics, which detect the problem; and active publics, which are organised to do something about it.

Unfortunately, both the ritualistic citing of Dewey and the uses made of his ideas in the public relations literature seriously distort both the nature and purpose of his work. Like others of his generation in the early twentieth century, notably Walter Lippman, Dewey struggled passionately with the theory and methods of democracy, which he and others saw as in peril. Dewey continually called for active, vocal, participatory publics as the very heart of a democratic society, whereas public relations practitioners are counselled by Grunig and others to defuse publics before they develop a power base and act. Basing contemporary public relations theory and practice — especially issues management — on Dewey's ideas about the public is troublesome, to say the least.

It is difficult to square this "nipped bud" strategy with the requirement that citizens participate fully in the issues that affect them. Nor does this strategy fit easily into the role claimed for public relations in a democratic society — that it functions to stimulate debate within the "court of public opinion." When citizen apathy and lack of participation in public policy making is often decried, it is difficult to justify — at least in democratic terms — a public relations strategy whose goal is to gain control of the debate and discourage action.

## Two Suggestions for Re-connecting Public Relations Theory with Democratic Theory

This article has argued that the dominant voices in public relations research are not tied to broader social and political theory and have failed to explore the difficult issues associated with the role of public relations practice in a democratic society. This is not only a significant weakness of the field, it also represents a turn away from the historical roots of public relations practice. The self-conscious practice of public relations emerged in the early 20th century, a time when many prominent thinkers, including the so-called founding fathers of public relations, Ivy Lee and Edward L. Bernays, were much concerned with the problem of communication in a democratic society.

As Hiebert writes, Lee's lifetime of work was focused on exploring the role of public information in a newly industrialised mass society. Bernays' book *Propaganda* begins with a chapter entitled "Organising Chaos," in which he explicitly lays out a view (albeit a pessimistic one) of public decision making. Lee and Bernays may not have found or articulated a useful model for democratic public relations, but they each kept it as focus of their work. The current turn towards functionalist or systems-based research has lost that broader view and therefore has failed to develop a theoretical base for the practice of public relations. Two strategies for reconnecting public relations research to democratic theory follow.

### Public Relations History and Models of Democracy

As preface to his insightful analysis of four historians of public relations, Pearson claims that since "all writing about the past is an attempt to understand the present" the histories of a field as full of contradictions as is public relations are especially important (Pearson 1992, 111). Pearson examines public relations histories constructed by Hiebert (1966), Pimlott (1951), Tedlow (1979), Smythe (1981), and Olasky (1987) in order to find the underlying assumptions that shape each. Such analysis is important, he argues, because it is a way of "mapping the terrain within which arguments about public relations occur and of uncovering the sometimes unarticulated philosophies of public relations that are extant in management and public relations literature" (Pearson 1992, 113).

One of those unarticulated philosophies is the role of public relations within a democracy, a concept that naturally depends on one's ideas of what a democratic society is. Although an explication of democratic principles is not Pearson's purpose, he returns again and again to the historians, assumptions about the relationship between public relations practice and larger social and political concerns. His analysis and synthesis therefore is an important link between public relations research and practice and political theory.

Pearson finds that in his biography of Ivy Lee, Hiebert (1966), emphasised the democratising influence of public relations. The ideals driving his analysis are the democratic ideals of an informed and active citizenry" (Pearson 1992, 126). Hiebert does not lay out a systematic democratic theory, but places democratic values at the core of Lee's work. The model of democracy that seems to be implied here focuses on the role of information in the decision-making process. He argues that public relations practice contributes to a democratic society because it helps to circulate the in-

formation that individual citizens need to make public decisions or to choose their representatives.

The concept of “information” is also integral to Hiebert's (and Lee's) view of public relations practice and research. In the usual view, public relations practitioners function in a democratic society by providing information, which is then used by individuals in making decisions about public issues. The metaphors of a “court of public opinion” or a “free marketplace of ideas”, are commonly used to suggest that consumers of information hold the ultimate power and freely choose among competing ideas. This implies that information is neutral and transparent. Indeed, public relations researchers and practitioners have attempted to distance themselves from the concept of persuasion in favour of a model of information exchange. It also implies that individual citizens have complete information. That is rarely the case, since, as Rakow argues, information

*cannot be thought of as innocent or “some pure good.” It is the product of social relations, and, at this particular point in time, it is by and large produced by institutions to suit their own purposes (Rakow 1989, 170).*

Institutions that engage in public relations activities are, of course, doing so to advance their own goals and strategic interests, and the information they provide to the “marketplace of ideas”, will reflect those interests. How information is organised and packaged as “knowledge” is explored in the literature based in sociology of culture, or more specifically in studies of news production (for example, Tuchman 1978; Sigal 1973; Shoemaker and Reese 1991).

Where Hiebert situates public relations within a trend of increased democratisation in twentieth century America, Olasky (1987) and Smythe (1981) offer spirited critiques from the right and left respectively — of both public relations history and contemporary practice. Olasky “focused on the way in which public relations activity threatens what he believes are basic American values — competition and the rights of individuals — values that are often associated with capitalism” (Pearson 1992, 127). The values of capitalism also form the basis of Smythe's critique, but from an opposing perspective. Public relations — the effort to create public acceptance of business practices — developed as a response to a growing legitimacy crisis faced by capitalist business in the twentieth century.

Both these interpretations are explicitly tied to broader political theory and imply very different conceptions of a democratic society. Where Olasky situates democracy in individual rights to participate in an unfettered free market, Smythe finds the essence of democracy in the rights of individuals to understand and meaningfully participate in the political and economic decisions that affect their lives. For both, however, the development of public relations is part of a distinctly undemocratic trend. Public relations is practised by self-interested organisations and works to secure for them both economic and symbolic power. Public relations as practised by businesses consolidates power and thereby reduces the role — and rights — of citizens.

Pimlott (1951) and Tedlow (1979) each advanced functional interpretations of public relations history. Although Pimlott's book is titled *Public Relations and American Democracy*, Pearson claims that democratic ideals do not play an overt explanatory role in his work. Instead, according to Pearson, Pimlott concludes that republic relations, significance is twofold — it is highly functional for the smooth functioning of society and supportive of American democratic ideals” (Pearson 1992, 120). Pearson

claims that both Tedlow and Pimlott interpret the development of public relations as part of a more general movement toward specialisation that took place in the early and middle twentieth century. Public relations practitioners are the experts in communication that help the organisation function more efficiently and effectively in a complex society. This interpretative framework falls within what Pearson calls the “management paradigm”. Although this view does not seem to rely on democratic principles to explain the role of public relations, it is implicitly linked with a very limited notion of democracy that values efficiency and the survival and stability of the system over individual participation. What Pearson calls the “management paradigm” is also consistent with the functionalist, pluralist, systems-based research represented by Grunig’s two-way symmetrical model.

These four historical explanations for public relations differ significantly in their emphasis and depend — either implicitly or explicitly — on divergent views of democratic society (Figure 1).

Hiebert’s notion of public relations practitioners as contributing to a free marketplace of ideas is linked with classical models of democracy. Although Hiebert does not develop or make clear his assumptions about a democratic society, they seem to match most closely the models democratic theorist David Held calls “protective democracy” and “developmental democracy” (Held 1987, 70, 102). Both depend on individual participation in political affairs and in a competitive market economy.

Figure 1

Historian	Role of Public Relations	View of Democracy
Hiebert	provides information necessary for citizenship	marketplace of ideas, court of public opinion
Olasky	threatens basic American values associated with capitalism	individual rights, free market
Smythe	legitimizes power of capitalist business	participation, equal distribution of information and resources
Pimlott/Tedlow	smoothes the functioning of society	efficiency, stable system, limited participation

In Pimlott’s and Tedlow’s interpretative frameworks, democracy becomes little more than a way of organising decision-making, and the role of public relations work within a democracy is to contribute to a smoothly running and stable system. The model of democracy that seems to mesh with this view is what Held calls “competitive elitism” (1987, 184). Within that model, the normative aspects of democratic theory are lost. A democracy is no longer valued because it is right that people should share in making the decisions that affect their lives. Rather, some limited form of participation is tolerated because it legitimises those who hold power and therefore increases the stability of the system.

Some democratic theorists have now begun to focus on the growth of corporatism as a feature of contemporary societies. Corporatism is characterised by a relatively small number of powerful interest groups — officially or unofficially recognised by the state — seeking to influence public policy (Held 1987, 217). In their very different ways, both Smythe and Olasky draw on a corporatist model in explaining the emergence of public relations practice, which they both argue has eroded the democratic

nature of contemporary society by reducing the possibilities for individual participation. The corporatism model is especially interesting in terms of the growth of issues management as a subfield of public relations. The role and responsibilities (and limitations) of institutions of various kinds within a democracy based on individual rights is a crucial and under explored area of research.

Pearson's essay focuses on histories of public relations, but the same strategy could be used to uncover the assumptions of contemporary research. As noted earlier, the dominant strand of public relations research is linked to a pluralistic view of society, which assumes that power is more or less equally distributed among competing groups. It is also based in a systems or functionalist orientation, which posits the efficiency and survival of the social organism as a basic explanatory feature.

As Rakow (1989) notes, the usual public relations model within the systems orientation focuses on the ways that the organisation interacts with "its" publics, with the ultimate goal of managing communication for the interests of the organisation. Such a view, she suggests, distorts the concept of public that public relations researchers say they have drawn from Dewey. A model consistent with Dewey's notion of public would place the public, not client organisations, at the centre, directing the activities of a number of institutions. In other words, in this reconfigured model, an active public would be the subject, rather than the object of public relations activity.

Such a model would be consistent with a participatory model of democracy outlined by Held (1987, 262). Key features of that model include direct participation of citizens in regulation of the key institutions of society — business and government. Because public relations research is so closely connected with client interests, a participatory democratic model is a direct and serious challenge.

Botan (1993) outlines what he calls a paradigm struggle in public relations. On the one hand there is a business-oriented management practice, and on the other, an academic study. The integrity of the latter will depend on the willingness of researchers to expand their focus in order to honestly explore hard questions of how public relations practice fits into society.

### Criteria for a Model of Democratic Public Relations

Another way to begin connecting public relations research and democratic theory is to consider how one might evaluate whether in any particular situation public relations practice is consistent with democratic norms.

In his book, *Democracy*, Carl Cohen (1971) provides a set of terms on which to evaluate how, and in what ways, a particular community or nation or group function democratically. He argues that democracy is not an all or nothing proposition. Rather, he says, one must explore the nature of decision making within a society and then determine to what extent the community or state or organisation functions to ensure that all are involved. Since participation is the key to a democracy, he proposes that it must be the key to evaluating its success. One can evaluate a democracy in terms of the breadth, the depth, and the range of participation in it.

"Breadth" refers to the proportion of those in a community affected by a decision who participate in making it. In a fully democratic community, all who are affected by a decision have an equal voice in determining its resolution. Questions to be posed here include: Who is participating in this decision? Are some individuals or groups systematically excluded? Do all who participate have equal power in determining the outcome?

“Depth” refers to the nature of the participation in the decision. In a fully democratic community, all are encouraged to participate in forming issues and proposing solutions as well as in deciding between alternatives presented by others. Questions here include: How do issues come to the attention of the community? Who develops the policy alternatives?

“Range” refers to the areas in which democracy operates. In a fully democratic community, its members share authority for all matters. Questions here include: Is the economic or business realm defined as public or private? How are decisions made in the workplace? Which questions or issues are considered open for discussion and debate?

These are some of the issues and questions public relations research must begin to explore. Bringing public relations research and theory in touch with broader political theory is a necessary step. Because public relations is practised by organisations, it seems essential to explore the role and rights of institutions — as opposed to individuals — in various conceptions of democratic societies.

## Notes:

1 Recent work, however, suggests that some researchers are thinking critically about the assumptions that underpin the dominant paradigm. Coombs (1993) argues that both systems and rhetorical approaches to public relations research rely on a non-existent or oversimplified conception of power. This lack of an adequate theory of power seriously weakens the public relations research paradigm. Creedon (1993) examines the deficiencies of systems theory in public relations research, in particular its uncritical acceptance of infrastructure norms that work against change.

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