

CHAPTER 7

Publics and Public Relations

Effecting Change

Shirley Leitch and Judy Motion

This chapter summarizes and extends the work of Leitch and Neilson (2001) published in the 2001 version of the *Handbook of Public Relations*. The chapter begins with a reflective overview of that earlier piece and its critique of the application of the core public relations concepts of “publics,” “organizations,” and “relations” within dominant public relations theoretical approaches. We then extend the work of Leitch and Neilson by adding the additional core concept of “change.” Our discussion is grounded in discourse theory, which, we contend, is both highly relevant and salient for the theory and practice of public relations. We conclude the chapter by considering three significant contemporary challenges for theory development—“multiplicity,” “resistance,” and “engagement”—that are raised within this new discourse perspective on public relations.

Publics

One of the major contributions offered by Leitch and Neilson (2001) lay in their critique of the way in which the major concept of publics had

been theorized and applied within the public relations literature. They began their critique by demonstrating that public relations theory had, for the most part, treated publics and organizations as interchangeable and equivalent entities. The two were interchangeable because from an organizational perspective, another organization could be categorized as a public. The concepts were equivalent because, in addition to being interchangeable, they were treated as if they were equal participants in any public relations process. This odd conceptualization only made sense because of the absence of the concept of power from most public relations theory (Coombs, 1993). The primary outcome of excluding power was to mask the existence and nature of differences and inequalities between organizations and publics, as well as within society more generally.

Leitch and Neilson (2001), therefore, set out to more clearly distinguish the concepts of publics and organizations and to consider how power might figure in the theory and practice of public relations. They argued that ignoring the underlying asymmetries in power relations between organizations and publics had led to a

dominant framework of public relations ethics that focused on symmetry in the form of communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Within this highly simplistic model, ethical public relations emerged exclusively from the symmetrical framing of organizational engagement with publics. Thus, organizations or publics that set out to change another's viewpoint would be labeled as unethical simply by virtue of the asymmetrical form of their communication practices. Public rallies, petitions, and street theater—the typical tools of citizens' actions—would all be labeled asymmetrical and, therefore, unethical. Leitch and Neilson (2001) argued that “form” was a relatively superficial indicator of ethics and, therefore, an inadequate basis for ethical public relations practice. A much broader analysis, which considered the context in which engagement occurred and the history, purpose, and resource base of the parties involved, was required (Leitch & Palmer, *in press*).

A related absence from public relations theory noted by Leitch and Neilson (2001) was, then, a developed concept of the “context” in which organizations might engage with publics. Again, this absence arose as a direct consequence of the neglect of any consideration of power relations. In a decontextualized theory of engagement with publics, the associated complexities—including the social, political, economic, ideological, virtual, and physical components of engagement—had been rendered largely invisible. However, what is “counted in” and what is “counted out” of any analysis makes a considerable difference to the strength of that analysis. A public relations

theory that counted out the broader context of the analytical frame was inevitably myopic and therefore, fundamentally flawed. In this chapter we outline the ways in which a robust theory of context, drawn from discourse theory, may strengthen public relations research and practice.

Habermas's (1962/1991) distinction between the “system” and the “lifeworld” provided Leitch and Neilson (2001) with a starting point for the development of an adequate theory of the context for public relations engagement (see Figure 7.1). The lifeworld is divided into the “public sphere” and the “private sphere.” The public sphere comprises all the public spaces in which citizens may exchange ideas and debate issues. In this respect, in Western democracies at least, the town hall has probably given way to the Internet as the most prominent and accessible dimension of the public sphere. Distinct from the public sphere was the lifeworld, which was the private “habitus” of individuals (Habermas, 1987, 1962/1991). The other half of Habermas's concept of social was the “system,” which was divided into the political subsystems of the state and the economic subsystems of the economy (Cohen & Arato, 1992). It is through the public sphere that citizens are able to interact with the state, and it is within the public sphere that public opinion can form and become manifest (Calhoun, 1988, 1992, 1996). Without the concept of the public sphere, public relations literature is unable to deal adequately with the relationship between organizations and publics, particularly in the context of Western democracies.

Figure 7.1 Integrating Social Concepts

	Public	Private
System	Political subsystem or “state”	Economic subsystem
Lifeworld	Public sphere	Private sphere

Source: Cohen and Arato (1992, p. 431).

Another significant issue for Leitch and Neilson (2001) related to the segmentation of publics, a well-established tenet of public relations (see, e.g., Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994). They argued that the turn to multiple publics has had some unintended consequences, the most startling of which has been the abandonment of the central democratic concept of "the public," comprising all the citizens of a nation who may engage within the public sphere. There is evidence that this neglect continues. For example, Rawlins and Bowen (2005) opened their *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* entry on "Publics" by confidently stating that "in modern public relations, there is no such thing as a 'general public'" (p. 718). A macrolevel focus on the public and its associated power dynamics has thus been discarded in favor of an exclusively microlevel focus on segmented organizational relationships. However, Leitch and Neilson (2001) argued that the general public should be seen as one of multiple, possible publics with which organizations may engage.

Organizations

Habermas's (1962/1991) distinction between the "system" and the "lifeworld" provided Leitch and Neilson (2001) with a means of reframing the relationships between "organizations" and "publics." The purpose of this reframing was to counter the existing conflation of these two terms. Organizations have generally been theorized as "system"-based entities. However, Cohen and Arato (1992) identified significant changes in the character of the public sphere in terms of its increasing propensity to organize into social movements and thereby to develop its own organizations. One might argue that social movements become part of the system once they develop an organizational structure. However, Leitch and Neilson (2001) contended that the organizations of the lifeworld have a distinctive identity because they emerge from communicative exchanges that occur within the public

sphere, while system organizations embody the strategic goals and rationality of the state and economy. They offered the following typology:

1. System organizations of state and economy
2. Lifeworld organizations of the public sphere
3. Boundary organizations, which have some characteristics of both the system and the lifeworld and operate across the system/lifeworld boundary

Within this typology, lifeworld organizations are understood as a subset of lifeworld publics, albeit a high-profile group. Leitch and Neilson (2001) then identified three categories of organization-public relationships:

1. Intersystem organization relations comprising relations between the organizations of the state and the corporate sector
2. Intraorganizational relations comprising relations within an organization
3. Organization-public relations comprising relations between an organization and an external public that is not a system-based organization

Thus, system organizations were differentiated both from "unorganized" publics and from publics that had developed their own organizational structures.

Relations

The final core public relations concept considered by Leitch and Neilson (2001) was "relations." They sought to move the focus of analysis on the relations between organizations and publics to a concern with

power, strategy, objectives, and the manifold ways each articulates and overdetermines, constructs and deconstructs, organizes and

disorganizes, the other. Public relations is about the many ways in which different types of publics interact with different types of organizations, and vice versa, on a strategic terrain of competing discourses and unequal access to power and resources. (p. 134)

Rejecting the dominant and demonstrably superficial focus on the form of communicative exchanges of communication, they argued that relations should instead be analyzed in terms of strategy, objectives, and any differences in access to power and resources.

In conceptualizing "relations," Leitch and Neilson (2001) drew on Heath's (1994, p. 364) three-dimensional concept of dialogue, comprising the following:

1. "Values," which are the evaluative frameworks applied by publics to make sense of actions and interactions and thereby create meaning
2. "Meaning," which is formed, reformed, and challenged through the actions of and the interactions between people
3. "Zones of meaning," which are the shared realities of members of particular publics and which combine to form "the fabric of public opinion" (R. Heath, personal communication, June 30, 1998)

Relations are thus viewed as comprising sets of communicative actions that are evaluated by members of publics through value-based frameworks to "make sense" of these interactions and thereby create meanings. These meanings may then come together through further interactions to form the shared realities of publics and, potentially, the shared zones of meaning between organizations and publics. This conceptualization directly challenges the organization-centered representations of engagement with publics that still dominate much public relations theory and research.

From Heath's (1994) perspective, public relations practice may be understood as the intentional

fostering of favorable zones of meaning between organizations and publics. An organization's objectives may be negotiated with its publics who then actively participate in the cocreation of meaning. Thus, favorable zones of meaning are outcomes of successful interactions between publics and organizations. Both an organization's and a public's capability and willingness to engage in such interactions will be resource and context dependent. In this respect, Leitch and Neilson (2001) distinguished between unorganized and organized publics. Unorganized publics were defined as those without "an institutional structure, legitimated spokespeople, a clearly articulated agenda, and/or significant discourse resources" and which therefore had limited power (Leitch & Neilson, 2001, p. 136). They noted that it was difficult to engage with such publics or to forge new zones of meaning (Heath, 1994). Unorganized publics are, in effect, merely artifacts of the organizations themselves, which have no existence outside particular public relations strategies.

Some publics do, however, exist independently of system-based organizations and, as discussed above, may have developed into "lifeworld organizations." Such publics offer a fundamental challenge to organization-centered public relations in that they may possess goals of their own. As Leitch and Neilson (2001) argued, the Grunig and Hunt (1984) models assumed that the form taken by public relations interactions would be determined by the organization. However, organized publics may seek to determine their own destinies and may develop resource and power bases that challenge those of system organizations. Heath (1997, p. 156) noted that "activism has become institutionalized" within lifeworld organizations where it is neither readily controlled nor easily manipulated.

Within the next section, we augment the work of Leitch and Neilson (2001) by outlining a discourse approach to public relations. We seek to redirect the attention of both researchers and practitioners to rhetorical understandings of "publics" and "relations" and offer a distinctly poststructuralist focus on

understanding these core public relations concepts in particular discourse contexts.

Changing a Discourse

Heath's (2001, p. 31) reference to public relations as "suasive discourse" serves as a reminder that we are not dealing with a symmetrical communicative practice. Rather, a key aim of public relations is to achieve or resist change by persuasively advancing and potentially privileging particular meanings and actions. Although the objectives may be negotiated or consensus sought through engagement with publics, it may also be achieved through persuasion. Public relations, therefore, constitutes a rhetorical practice (Heath, 1992) that establishes a discursive contest between organizations and publics, which, moreover, is neither inherently good nor bad. Indeed, the introduction of such ethical or moral evaluations necessitates the incorporation of the previously neglected contextual dimensions discussed earlier within public relations theory (Leitch & Palmer, in press). Discourse theory—with its emphasis on the understanding of texts within the contexts in which they are produced, distributed, and interpreted—therefore offers a highly relevant and useful body of theory to guide the development of ethical public relations practice. Discourse theory also refocuses our attention away from the form of communication and onto power relationships and the ongoing work by public relations practitioners to legitimate truth claims within discourse contexts (Motion & Leitch, 2009b).

Although a variety of approaches to discourse theory and analysis exist, the poststructuralist works of Michele Foucault and Norman Fairclough are particularly salient to public relations because of the emphasis on language, meaning, and change (Motion & Leitch, 1996, 2009a, 2009b). Fairclough is well established as the most influential discourse theorist within the related field of organization studies (Leitch & Palmer, in press), and work within this field that

adopts a discourse perspective is highly relevant to public relations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000a, 2000b; Anderson, 2005; Hardy, 2001; Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000; Heracleous, 2006; Leitch & Davenport, 2005; Maguire & Hardy, 2006; Motion & Leitch, 2009b; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006).

Fairclough (1992, 1995) offered a three-dimensional model of discourse comprising texts; the discourse practices associated with the production, distribution, and interpretation of texts; and the broader sociocultural context of these texts and practices, including ideological and institutional dimensions. Initially, Fairclough adopted a relatively conservative definition of texts as written language but later expanded this definition to include—as texts—visual images and sound (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2). Fairclough viewed texts as discursive objects that are intended by those who produce them to have causal effects (Leitch & Palmer, in press). These effects are, in turn, mediated by the act of sensemaking on the part of those who interpret them and, thereby, give them meaning. However, as Phillips and Hardy (2002) argued, "It is not individual texts that produce social reality, but structured *bodies* of texts" (p. 82). This focus on understanding the intertextual relationships between bodies of texts is particularly appropriate for public relations practice, which involves the production of sets of texts for organizations and for campaigns to advance organizational objectives.

Fairclough (1992) referred to those who actively engage in seeking to effect change within discourse as "professional technologists who research, redesign and provide training in discourse practices" (p. 8). Public relations practitioners may be seen as an obvious and major subset of Fairclough's profession of discourse technologists (Motion & Leitch, 1996). Discourse technologists seek to achieve change by transforming discourses, which involves changing established ways of thinking about particular objects, concepts, subjects, and strategies (Foucault, 1969/1972) or introducing new language and, therefore, new ways of thinking.

The meanings circulating within a discourse are therefore always potentially in flux as they are produced, reproduced, actively resisted, contested, or transformed by publics and organizations (Hardy et al., 2000).

Foucault (1991, pp. 56–57) explained that a successful discourse transformation may be identified by

1. new boundaries that define and map out what is included,
2. new subject positions and roles for those acting within the discourse,
3. new modes of language, and/or
4. new forms and ways of circulating the discourse within society.

The boundaries of a discourse may have their roots in deep social structures that are imbued with particular ideologies or systems of thought, in which case effecting change is a complex task. For example, a health discourse may have been founded on the social democratic principle of the right of all citizens to receive good quality health care. This discourse may be challenged by a neoliberal government that espouses individual rather than social responsibility for health and, by privileging economic considerations, seeks to introduce a “user-pays” approach into health policy. The ideological shift will be accompanied by the creation of new subject positions and roles for the publics and organizations who act within the health discourse. The subject position of “patient” may be replaced by that of “customer,” and of hospital by “service provider,” which in turn fundamentally alters the power relationships between publics and organizations within the health discourse context. Leitch and Neilson (2001) argued that organizations deploy public relations strategies to create and then persuade members of publics to accept subject positions that articulate most advantageously with the interests of the organization (Hall, 1986; Moffitt, 1994; Motion & Leitch, 1996; Slack, 1996). The rules that operate

within discourse contexts constrain the identity possibilities that are available to individuals and set the framework of power relations between various subject positions. To fundamentally challenge these subject positions is a revolutionary act because it involves a challenge to the rules of the discourse itself.

The third dimension of discourse transformation is the new modes of language that are introduced. The design of language was identified by Fairclough (1992) as one of the key components of the work of discourse technologists as they seek to engineer change because language is the primary vehicle for the meanings that circulate within discourse. To continue the health discourse example, a neoliberal change initiative may introduce and privilege new language drawn from a managerial discourse, such as “key performance indicators,” “cost-benefit analysis,” and “efficiencies.” Power and control within the health discourse then shifts from doctors and other health-related publics to professional managers. These professional managers may have limited understanding of the health context in which they act and, in this sense, apply decontextualized “knowledge.” Fairclough used the concept of “marketization” to describe the spread of decontextualized knowledge that privileges the economic over all other considerations and that has been a hallmark of the neoliberalist era that has prevailed within most Western democracies for the past three decades.

The fourth dimension of discourse transformation involves the appearance of new forms and ways of circulating the discourse within society. This dimension takes us from the intradiscursive to focus on the interdiscursive and extradiscursive. As Foucault (1991, p. 58) suggested, it is important to consider

1. how a discourse is transformed internally—the intradiscursive focus,
2. how relations between discourses shift as a result of internal transformation—the interdiscursive focus, and

3. how elements that lie outside discourse are brought into discourse to affect both the intradiscursive and the interdiscursive—the extradiscursive focus.

Taken together, these three foci constitute a powerful analytical tool for understanding the underlying mechanisms and dynamics of discourse change. This tool may be used to design or map

1. the rules within a discourse governing what may be said and what is no longer legitimate;
2. the production, reproduction, transformation, and circulation of meaning;
3. the subject positions available to individuals, publics, or organizations that have access to a discourse;
4. the power relations between organizations that seek to transform discourse and other discourse subjects both within and between discourses;
5. how any resulting power struggles are played out;
6. the “domain” or institutional origin of the discourse (Foucault, 1991); and
7. how externalities affect discourses and how their effects are played out within and between discourses.

This analytical tool, we contend, is central to the work of public relations practitioners when they undertake the design and redesign of discourses (Fairclough, 1992).

Design work may be applied to the creation of identities, relationships, and the language associated with particular ideas (Fairclough, 1992). However, from a public relations perspective, the formation or transformation of a discourse only occurs when established ways of thinking are changed within a particular public. Here we draw on the work of Stuart Hall (1986) to introduce

the concepts of “disarticulation” and “articulation” to explain how this change process occurs in practice. Disarticulation is defined as a process whereby undesired meanings are disestablished, whereas articulation is defined as the process of linking existing meanings with the meanings of a new discourse (Motion, Leitch, & Brodie, 2003). One way in which new ideas are brought into discourse is by articulating them with a “legacy” or established discourse (Maguire & Hardy, 2006), so that the change may seem less extensive or alien to publics and to increase the likelihood that the change will be accepted. For example, the introduction of a user-pays approach into health may be argued on the basis that “efficiency” means “providing better health care for more people”—a traditional concern within the health discourse—rather than “cutting costs”—the primary concern within an economic discourse.

Another application of the concepts of articulation and disarticulation within discourse transformations centers on subject positions. Subject positions that are familiar and acceptable to members of a public may be lifted from one discourse and articulated into another as a way of adding legitimacy to new ideas or of changing what existing ideas mean. Members of publics occupy subject positions within multiple discourses, each of which has its own rules of engagement and power relations (Moffitt, 1994). Concepts that are new within a particular discourse context may become familiar (and therefore more acceptable) if they are understood from the perspective of a different subject position. For example, the introduction of the subject position of “taxpayer” into a health discourse may help persuade members of the general public to look at health issues from an economic perspective. The articulation and disarticulation of both ideas and identities may then be seen as part of the “training” of publics by public relations practitioners in their role as discourse technologists (Fairclough, 1992).

The goal of training is always to establish new ways of thinking and acting as legitimate. Vaara et al. (2006) argued that “legitimacy means a discursively created sense of acceptance in specific

discourses" (p. 793). The legitimacy of texts, discourse practices, and associated identities; relationships; and ideas must, therefore, always be considered in terms of the specific discourse contexts in which they are situated (Leitch & Palmer, in press). If a discourse succeeds in achieving legitimacy, it also achieves a certain status as "truth." Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips (2006, pp. 196–197) argued that legitimacy grounds truth somewhat more than truth grounds legitimacy. This statement captures Clegg's view of Foucault's (1980) concept of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980; Motion & Leitch, 2009a), which is defined in terms of the inseparability of power and knowledge. Foucault (1980) wrote that "the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (p. 52). Occupying positions of power within a discourse enables some discourse subjects to determine what is to count as knowledge in that discourse context. A parliament may determine the law, while a judge may determine the truth of guilt or innocence under that law. Conversely, the body of knowledge that makes up the law is itself the source of legitimacy for the subject positions of lawmaker and judge. An understanding of power/knowledge and how it operates within and between discourse contexts is central to the task of transforming discourse (Fairclough, 1992) and, therefore, to the theory and practice of public relations. The discursive understanding that power/knowledge is contextual provides a more sophisticated view of how truth functions within discourse—a topic largely neglected by public relations scholars (Motion & Weaver, 2005).

We now turn to the concept of positioning, which is central to advancing our understanding of the process whereby changes are effected in the relations within organizations, between organizations, between organizations and publics, and within publics. The concept of subject positions has been discussed earlier in terms of the positions available for "subjects to take up" (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991, p. 395) within a discourse. Positioning is a more active concept that explains the processes whereby subject positions are

created for publics and transformed relative to other subject positions. This active use of "positioning" may be traced to the field of marketing, where it refers to the communication strategies that allow one to "place" a certain product among its competitor products (Ries & Trout, 1981, as referred to in Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991). The work of positioning publics and organizations involves attempting to determine, for example, what roles they may play and what power and resources they may draw on relative to one another. The concept of discursive positioning is therefore of central importance to public relations work.

The work of Moffitt (1994, which has been drawn on above in our discussion of subject positions) offered the important insight that members of publics do not hold one subject position, viewpoint, or what she termed *image*, but may instead hold multiple, even contradictory positions, viewpoints, or images at the same time. This insight is important for our understanding of positioning because it reminds us that positioning people within discourse is far more complex than positioning products. Marketing theory, therefore, provides a stimulus for thinking about positioning, but it is only a starting point. A theory of positioning that is sufficiently robust for the purposes of public relations means understanding the multiple subject positions and multiple discourse contexts in play. The notion that individuals may hold multiple positions with a discourse also validates the notion that discourse subjects have "agency": They are able to actively engage in constructing their own subject positions and in attempting to reposition others. Some subject positions within a discourse context may offer strategic options to express personal and social identities, or to adopt a moral stance, while others may confer power and legitimacy (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1991). However, some subject positions that confer neither may be forced or involuntary.

In such situations, publics may react negatively to the organization's public relations strategy by choosing to adopt their own strategies of resistance as a way of regaining power within the discourse (Leitch & Motion, 2008).

Concluding Challenges

In this chapter, we have sought to both reflexively revisit and extend the earlier work of Leitch and Neilson (2001) on core public relations concepts. In addition to considering the original concepts of “publics,” “organizations,” and “relations,” we have directed attention at the concept of “change”—the objective that lies at the heart of much public relations work. Change has been theorized here from a critical discourse perspective, which offers a more contextually nuanced approach than has typically been the case within mainstream public relations theory. A discourse approach to public relations directs our attention to a number of key challenges, including how to navigate the multiplicity of discourses and subject positions within these discourses. Resistance to change by publics—particularly organized publics—and the role of engagement are other significant issues for public relations practice. In our concluding statements, we would like to sketch out some specific challenges for theory development raised within this new discourse framework for public relations in the hope that it will stimulate both debate and further research.

The Challenge of Multiplicity

Multiplicity was a major focus for Leitch and Neilson (2001), and—a decade on—it remains a concept with which we are still grappling in both our practice and our theory development. The multiplicity of subject positions, publics, and discourses along with the inherent polysemy of language itself must be considered during the production of even basic public relations texts, such as news releases. A glance at the popular public relations texts suggests that we are not yet equipping our graduates to deal with such complexities. In addition, the neglect of the power relations between organizations, between organizations and publics, and between publics continues to impoverish our theorizing. The concepts of “publics,” “relations,” and “change” cannot, however, be understood without a concomitant

consideration of both multiplicity and power (see Heath, Motion, & Leitch, Chapter 13, this volume). In practice, organizational attempts to discursively position publics and control meaning may be subverted or resisted, particularly as publics develop organizational structures and power bases and become more sophisticated in the ways in which they engage with system organizations. Resistance is, we contend, growing in significance as a major challenge for public relations practice. We now briefly outline what we see as the key dimensions of this challenge.

The Challenge of Resistance

Clegg et al. (2006, p. 319) argued that resistance is “largely done discursively,” which means that to understand the phenomenon of resistance to change, we also need to understand discourse and discourse practices. The act of resistance is defined here as a challenging act in relation to the exercise or intended exercise of power within a particular discourse context (Clegg et al., 2006). As discussed by Thomas and Davies (2005), within the organizational literature, there has been an increasing problematization of the concept of resistance centered on two questions: (1) “What counts as resistance?” and (2) “When does resistance count?” They argued for a broad view of resistance that encompasses a wide range of challenging acts and that operates both at the level of meaning and at the level of identity. They concluded,

Challenging one subject position involves drawing on an alternative or subverting the original, in a process of reinterpreting dominant discourses. Resistance is therefore not only oppositional and negative kicking back against the subjectivity offered but also a critical and ultimately generative reflexive process. (p. 727)

This view of resistance—as both oppositional and generative or creative—is in stark contrast to the view that resistance is generally deviant or aberrant behavior. Foucault (1980)

stated that “there are no relations of power without resistance” (p. 142). Similarly, Clegg et al. (2006) asserted,

Resistance is normal. Only an inability to see that the nature of social reality is socially constructed and thus appears differently to people who have different interests in its co-construction, negotiation and de-construction, would lead one to see resistance as in some way deviant. (p. 131)

The origins of resistance to change may, then, be traced to different sets of interests or, at least, to perceptions that interests differ. In addition, we would argue that change may impact on identities as well as on interests (Leitch & Davenport, 2005; Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003). Foucault (1991) contended that actors derive power from the discourse context(s) in which they act. Identities that clash with contentious discourses become oppositional and, therefore, positioned as resistant. Thus, organizations seeking to introduce change should anticipate resistance as a normal response from publics with identity positions or interests potentially affected by the desired change. One common response to resistance or civil unrest is engagement. Traditionally, resistance and engagement have been treated as two separate literatures. Yet engagement often results from acts of resistance and power contestation. Resistance may be thought of as a component of engagement—resistance is an attempt to create a conversation or communicate.

The Challenge of Engagement

When an organization initiates change, it has to, in some way, communicate or engage with publics. And it is through this communication process that organizations construct publics and draw the boundaries that the engagement is going to cross. As Leitch and Neilson (2001) argued, the opinions and ideas attributed to such publics are more likely to be both constructed and interpreted through an organizational lens than to

actually reflect the positions chosen by publics. The way in which an organization or individual engages across discourse boundaries will, then, to a large extent be determined by the way in which the publics and discourse boundaries have been constructed. Boundaries are artifacts of the people who draw them and mark out differences between discourses, people, and possible subject positions. What happens to the exercise of engaging across boundaries if we move away from this organization-centered approach to a public-centered approach? Is it really possible to think differently about engagement, and where would that thinking lead us? The first place it would lead, we argue, is to see publics as groups of people who can position their own identities and interests and who perhaps also form some kind of shared understanding of their collective interests and elements of shared identity (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Second, a more collaborative mode of discourse technologization may emerge. Digital and social media offer numerous possibilities for facilitating conversations about change and collaborative engagement.

Increasingly, protests and resistance are being staged through *YouTube*, which is one of the most popular entertainment sites on the Internet. According to its *Wikipedia* (October 2009) entry, a billion video clips are viewed daily on *YouTube*. In 2006, *YouTube* was purchased by that other giant of the Internet, *Google*, for US\$1.65 billion in stock. The eclectic content of *YouTube* defies classification; however, people go to *YouTube* for many reasons, including to share their ideas, thoughts, and imaginings about change initiatives and to discuss them with other people.

YouTube has become a significant global site for what we term *unorganized* engagement between people and organizations but which may have been more typically categorized as resistance. However, we still have very little understanding of how to undertake unorganized community engagement. Creative utilization of digital technologies is required to enable public relations professionals to seek out and understand the ways in which publics are choosing to engage.

At first glance, the advent of social media may be viewed as calling into question a discourse technologization model of public relations and change. However, the fundamental understanding of publics as a series of positions, and of relations as a series of power plays, remains unchanged. Instead, what emerges is a convergence of democratization and more traditional discourse technologization approaches in which attempts to influence are acknowledged as complex, multifaceted processes.

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