CHAPTER 9

Public relations theories – an applied overview: alternative approaches

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe and discuss public relations and social/communication science theories
- compare different approaches to public relations theory, such as critical and rhetorical schools of theory
- evaluate the key debates within public relations research traditions (e.g. management/systems schools versus critical approaches; Anglo-American versus European perspectives).

Structure

- Developing theory: alternative approaches
- Equity in public relations: considering women and minority groups
- New research directions

Introduction

In the last chapter we examined the normative theories – theories that describe how a profession ought to behave – that were developed, particularly from systems theory, to improve the understanding and practice of public relations as a profession. In more recent years, a concern with the social implications and effects of public relations, combined with the emergence of postmodernism, has given rise to different schools of theory development. These new approaches to public relations have cast the profession in a different light and challenged both academics and professionals to think beyond the nature of practice to its impact on audiences, society and the public sphere.

Today we face a more fragmented and challenging academic landscape for public relations than ever. It is more visible in the everyday world and in academic circles. Practitioners have become academics and academics from different disciplines have turned their attention to the field. New insights have been developed and older approaches have been reviewed to include or reflect on public relations. As the chapter suggests, this has led not to consensus about the theoretical nature and content of public relations but, rather, to increasing friction. However, it is precisely these disagreements and conflicts that are generating the most interesting debates about understanding the field of public relations. These debates are explored in this chapter, which examines the major alternative theories of public relations, their evolution and the social impetus that continues to drive theory development.

Developing theory: alternative approaches

Critical theory

Critical theory has its origins in Marxist analysis of society and the economy. In a nutshell, Marx argued that power was determined by ownership of the means of production (capital), which lay in the hands of the bourgeoisie (the owners, or middle classes). The proletariat, or workers, had power inasmuch as they provided the labour to operate the capital, producing surplus value that ultimately created wealth. Marx proposed that this profit was not distributed equally and that, ultimately, the proletariat should overthrow the bourgeoisie in order to seize control of the means of production and redistribute wealth.

Critical theorists take elements of Marxism to analyse phenomena (objects, systems and events) that interest them. When examining PR, critical theorists go beyond the immediate practice of PR, to look at PR in its societal and economic context. For critical theorists, systems theories like those proposed by Grunig and his colleagues are incomplete since they ignore the context of PR in terms of its origin in, and impact on, existing power relations in society.

Generally, critical theorists argue that PR practitioners perpetuate the ability of both corporations and government to maintain a privileged position in society, usually by dominating the news agenda and excluding minority voices from public debate. Miller and Dinan (2000) show how the growth of the PR industry in the UK was a direct result of the shift towards a strong neoliberal agenda favouring privatisation, free markets and individualism during the 1980s and early 1990s. The profession is indebted to commercial and government interests for the size and scope of the industry today and continues to work in their favour.

Critical theorists suggest that PR is inherently tied to corporate interests. For example, Davis (2000) found that the production of business and financial news is in fact the work of a select few parties – specific journalists, analysts, major shareholders and shareholding institutions and corporate PR practitioners. Using the example of a corporate takeover bid, Davis demonstrates that, by excluding non-corporate views from stories (for example, employees or small shareholders), this group of specialists transform business 'news' into messages that reinforce a company's superiority in the marketplace, rather than stories reflecting a more balanced version of events. L'Etang and Pieczka (1996) provide a variety of alternative perspectives of PR as a discipline

weighted in favour of governmental and corporate interests. They argue for a move away from the simplistic view of PR as a management discipline, operating purely within the framework of organisational interests and with apparently few consequences beyond this environment. Similarly, Mickey (2002) analyses a range of case studies using a critical perspective, demonstrating that, even in contexts as diverse as gardening, AIDS prevention and art exhibitions, PR is inextricably linked to the interests it serves and perpetuates the environment in which those interests are most successful. He pinpoints a key argument of the critical school: PR by its very nature is biased and can only work in favour of its corporate masters.

Critical theorists propose two basic arguments that underpin their view of a partisan PR. The 'resource imbalance' perspective proposes that the economic resources available to practitioners and the increasing dearth of funding and staffing in media organisations leads directly to journalists becoming more dependent on PR practitioners for their news stories (Stauber and Rampton 1995; Moloney 2000). In other words, journalists have less time and money than before with which to develop their own stories. At the same time, the number of stories they are required to produce has increased. Organisations, contrariwise, are investing more and more in PR capabilities. As a result, a greater number of more highly skilled PR practitioners can now offer journalists well-written *story leads* that vastly reduce the effort required to write a full story. In a pressured environment, these kinds of lead are invaluable and journalists use them extensively (Pitcher 2003).

> **Definition:** *Story leads* refers to initial ideas for news or feature stories, generated in press releases or directly suggested by PR practitioners, which journalists may or may not follow up.

The 'structural' argument demonstrates that corporate patterns of media ownership result in internal censorship of news stories within media organisations and a news agenda that hesitates to challenge received wisdom, for fear of stepping on owners' and advertisers' toes. (See Think about 9.1.)

The stories that are broadcast or printed are easier for owners and advertisers to digest; they might report new events or product launches, or the latest comings and goings at a senior level. PR sources are popular because they provide stories that 'fit' these corporate requirements and can be widely used (McChesney 1999; Croteau and Hoynes 2001). Some theorists see

activity 9.1

News analysis

Find a medium-length article in the business section of a newspaper of your choice. After reading the article, ask yourself:

■ Who are the main parties discussed in the story?
■ Who else might be affected by the events recounted in the story? Why do you think their point of view is not represented?
■ How might their views be similar to, or differ from, the views already expressed in the story?
■ How would their view change the story if it were included?

Feedback

Put yourself in the position of a company employee. How would the events in the story affect you?

this as a deliberate strategy for supporting the views of capitalists; others suggest that media workers simply absorb a set of values about what can and cannot be said in their medium, creating an agenda of acceptable and unacceptable points of view. (See Activity 9.1.)

Rhetorical perspectives

For the purposes of PR, rhetoric may be defined as 'persuasive strategies and argumentative discourse' (L'Etang 1996b: 106). The concept of rhetoric was originally closely aligned with the development of democracy and early Greek philosophers focused in particular on the ability of rhetoricians to persuade an audience through effective debate and argumentation. Critics such as Plato address the personal ethics of rhetoricians, who may use their skills to their own ends, rather than to further the process of democracy. Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric* formally outlined rhetoric as a persuasive science, separating the process from the individual and examining the basic requirements for persuasive success, including research into audiences and the best structure of an argument (L'Etang 1996b).

If we substitute PR for the words 'rhetoric' in the above paragraph, we can clearly see parallels between

the discussions centuries ago and those conducted about PR today. However, L'Etang points out the major limitation of the classical view of rhetoric for PR scholars: the problem of *relativism*.

Definition: Relativism is the idea that what is right or wrong, true or false, is not absolute but dependent on the circumstances, situation or culture.

If rhetorical quality is focused on the quality of debate and argument, the substance of that debate – and even the truth of that substance – becomes a secondary, and relative, consideration. For example, one person could have a sophisticated argument that eating people was right another might just have a feeling that it wasn't. The first speaker would win. Extending this further, the ethics associated with communication about a particular issue also become relative, *unless* scholars change their focus to the process of communication, rather than the specific content. Power, influence and access to communication must be considered if the full implications of rhetorical analyses are considered when examining PR practice (L'Etang 1996b).

In fact, rhetorical scholars of PR do adjust their focus, being interested in the nature and ethics of the processes underpinning PR, as well as in the broader impact of the practice on society. As Heath (1992: 19) puts it:

[The] ability to create opinions that influence how people live is the focal aspect of the rhetoric of public relations. In the process of establishing product, service or organizational identity . . . public relations practitioners help establish key terms – especially slogans, axioms and metaphors – by which people think about their society and organizations. These terms shape the way people view themselves as consumers, members of a community, contributors to the arts, and myriad other ways.

Thus, rhetoric is a two-way discussion between parties that has a particular end goal in mind. It takes

place, as Heath (1992) puts it, as part of a 'wrangle' of voices and not in isolation. Truth is necessary in order to engender trust in the rhetor (speaker), but individual perspectives must be brought to bear on the discussion in order to generate interpretation and debate. The ultimate outcome is assumed to be agreement between the two parties involved – the process of dialogue resulting in a meeting of minds somewhere in the middle of two extremes.

Definition: An *axiom* is a statement, proposition or idea that people accept as self-evidently true, even though the proposition itself may be unproven.

Heath (2000: 71) argues that PR 'is part of each society's rhetorical processes' enabling organisations and people to strategically manage and negotiate their relationships. Factors influencing its success include:

- the situation in which it takes place
- problems arising from that situation
- audiences
- messages
- message sources
- perceptions of these sources
- channels for communication
- the 'opinion environment'.

Rhetorical analysis of PR includes not just the spoken or written word, but other non-verbal and visual cues used by organisations in the process of persuasion. Thus, the symbolic nature of PR is also incorporated into rhetorical studies.

Cheney and Dionisopoulos (1989) argue that PR is inherently political, rhetorical and symbolic, creating understandings of the world for their organisations and its audiences:

Corporate communications specialists are in the business of producing symbols. They, much more than others in the organization, tell various publics "what the organisation is". They shape identity, manage issues, and powerfully locate the organisation in the world of public discourse (1989: 139).

Given this role, Cheney and Dionisopoulos argue that PR practitioners should be aware of the power they exercise in the interests of their 'bosses', and to the realities and identities that they create. PR practice should be moderated by considerations of ethics, consistency and balance between the interests of the internal audiences, such as employees or management, and external audiences such as customers or shareholders. For those on the receiving end of PR rhetoric, the challenge is to acknowledge those mes-

sages while facilitating their own advocacy through participation in relevant groups, engaging with companies where the opportunity arises and ensuring their reading of PR rhetoric is fully informed. (See also Chapter 14 for discussion of symbols and persuasive communication.)

L'Etang (1996b) emphasises the importance of retaining the view of the organisation as a key rhetor in society, rather than reducing analysis to the level of the individual. Only when this analytical viewpoint is incorporated into research can the impact of structural imbalances on the rhetorical process, in the form of power over and access to communications networks, be understood. In light of this understanding, discussions of the ethics of PR can be considered in their full context, rather than simply as an exercise in legitimating (or not) PR activities (see Activity 9.2).

Rhetorical theory can help practitioners become more effective by throwing light on the quality of arguments presented by organisations to justify their decisions. The better the justification, the more effective the PR (Skerlep 2001). It also allows practitioners to work out how the process of understanding develops for audiences. Moffitt (1992), for example, argues that meaning is constructed at the intersection of messages between publics and organisations – that is, in the process of dialogue between the two (see Think about 9.2).

The indispensable role of audiences in creating meaning repositions them at the centre of PR and

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activity 9.2

What's the *real* story?

Examine a party political press conference or broadcast. (Examples, including videos, from the 2005 UK election can be found at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/default.stm).

- What message is the speaker communicating about their party's activities and what 'picture' are they presenting of their organisation?
- What symbols are they using to tell the story (e.g. positive use of babies, technology, schoolchildren, nurses or negative stories about devils, wasted resources or other social problems)?
- How do they want me to react to their 'story'?
- What perspectives could have been included in the story but are not mentioned?
- What issues is the person refusing to answer, or avoiding? Why?

Feedback

Consider in your answers what fundamental view of the world the party is presenting – is it one that questions the principles of business or political process, or assumes they are inherently correct? Does it assume we all think the same way? Does it present 'families' or 'immigration' in a different way from other parties?

Do you passively accept what your university says to you about your course? Or does your experience, your opinions, the views of other students and other sources of information all act on their message to create a specific interpretation that is yours alone?

Feedback Only you can create meaning in light of your own experience. What you tell other people about the university and the course you are on reflects this process of dialogue between what the university says and what you actually experience.

mini case study 9.1

Mobil Oil

Crable and Vibbert (1983) studied *advertorial* placements by Mobil Oil. During the 1970s the company published an apparently non-controversial, light-hearted column for Sunday newspapers to generate support for its policies.

Definition: *Advertorial* means paid-for articles that resemble editorial content rather than adverts (see also Chapter 16).

'Observations' included 'cartoons, line art, chatty news items, wide-ranging editorial commentary' and simultaneously put Mobil's point of view across to the popular audience by using metaphor and comparisons with popular themes and issues. The column reached over half a million American homes at its peak (Crable and Vibbert 1983). Analysis of the text showed that the company in fact consistently presented items on six basic issues: regulation, Congress, the media, technology, conservation and appeals to 'common sense'. PR tactics in this case were focused explicitly on promoting business interests, but with no intention of dialogue or discussion – the persuasion element of rhetoric on its own.

mini case study 9.2

Three Mile Island nuclear disaster

Dionisopoulos and Crable (1988) illustrate how, in response to a nuclear power accident at Three Mile Island, the nuclear industry attempted to dominate the way issues were defined, including the safety of and need for nuclear power, in order to influence positively public discussion and attitudes towards nuclear power and ensure the survival of the industry.

challenges practitioners to keep track of their communications once they are 'released' into the wider environment.

A number of researchers have looked at PR initiatives and explained them in rhetorical terms. (See Mini case studies 9.1 and 9.2.)

Equity in public relations: considering women and minority groups

Taking their lead from organisational studies, some researchers have focused specifically on the actual practitioners of PR and the social distribution of the function among different populations. By far the greatest area of research relates to the role of women in PR and the effects that gender has on their relative power and influence in the profession, both individually and as a group.

Feminist theory

Feminist analyses of PR emerged in the late 1980s, as the number of women in the profession exceeded the number of men for the first time. Today, 70% of PR practitioners are women. Despite the fact that this is a predominantly female profession, studies have repeatedly found gender inequalities in salaries, salary expectations, hiring perceptions and representation at management level (Grunig et al. 2001; Aldoory and Toth 2002).

mini case study 9.3

A female public relations manager

To put these findings into context, take the example of a female PR manager with four staff in her team, managing a budget of £100,000. She might develop and manage PR campaigns primarily linked to marketing and product launches. These can be particularly high pressure and so when the volume of work gets too much for her team she might 'muck in' and help them with the day-to-day tactical jobs like ringing the media or writing press releases. This doubling up of tasks (plus any family commitments) may prevent her from taking part in informal networking activities (such as drinks after work or sporting activities). She therefore has fewer opportunities to influence or impress senior managers and may find it hard to move up the management hierarchy as a result. As a manager, she might be on the management team alongside marketing, HR, finance and other business functions, but if she is the only woman – and working in an area that is seen to be subordinate to marketing – her opinions might not be valued as much as the other managers and decisions are unlikely to reflect her input.

Feminist analyses of the profession have focused in particular on the reasons for this imbalance as well as on feminist interpretations of PR activity. In an analysis of the relationship between organisational structure, influence and gender, O'Neil (2003) summarises the following causes of the persistent inequalities:

1   Female practitioners are predominantly communications technicians; their task orientation prevents them from having greater power and influence on decision making within an organisation.
2   The technician role is generally placed lower in the organisational hierarchy, reducing the opportunity to take part in decisions that affect the future of the organisation.
3   Female practitioners tend to have less employee support than male practitioners; research suggests that this also reduces their power within the organisation and may require them to double up on a technician role, even when they are in a managerial position.
4   As a minority group at the managerial level, women may be regarded as 'tokens' or representatives of other women in the organisation. Research has shown that tokens have less organisational power than dominant groups have and they may have to struggle against negative stereotypes or create a persona that 'fits' with the dominant coalition to avoid threatening the status quo.
5   As well as being excluded from formal power networks such as management, women may be absent from informal power structures such as an 'old boy' network and thereby lose access to organisational resources and support.
6   Female practitioners tend to lack mentors, which may reduce their ability to learn key business skills that might help them progress up the hierarchy.
7   Finally, female PR practitioners may be perceived by senior management to be simply of less value to the organisation than men.

See Mini case study 9.3.

Choi and Hon (2002) tested the effects of gender balance in powerful organisational positions on perceptions of female and male practitioners relative to success. Gender integration at this senior level did improve evaluations of female practitioners and decreased the difference in salary between male and female practitioners. However, female respondents consistently perceived larger gender differences and evaluated men more favourably than male respondents, suggesting that gender-related stereotypes are deep seated, persistent, and perpetuated by women as much as men.

Based on these patterns, several feminist researchers have created the beginnings of feminist theories of PR. Hon (1995) provided a comprehensive feminist view of the field and produced a summary of antecedents (background/history) for, and strategies to, improve women's position in the profession (see Table 9.1).

Hon (1995) critiques liberal feminist approaches arguing for women to take action in order to alter their position, pointing out that such strategies cannot be successful if they rail against institutionalised sexism and organisational stereotypes. Instead, she argues for change at four levels: society, organisation, profession and individual (see Table 9.2).

These echo the findings of a five-year study by Grunig et al. (2001). They found that societal stereotypes of women have led to the devaluation of the

TABLE 9.1   Antecedents of and strategies to address women's position in public relations (*source:* based on Hon 1995: 43–65)

Antecedents	Strategies for change

• Marginalisation of the public relations function within the organisation
• Flawed curriculum focusing on technical rather than business skills and thereby degrading the public relations function
• Male-dominated work environment causing:
  – *exclusion from men's networks*
  – *reduction in women's self-esteem and self-worth*
  – *few female role models or mentors*
  – *lack of knowledge about or discomfort with male-defined rules for advancement*
  – *outmoded attitudes of senior men*
  – *conflicting messages for women, particularly in relation to personal attributes*
• Women's balancing act between work and home life
• Gender stereotypes
• Sexual harassment and 'lookism' – a tendency to focus on appearance rather than job performance
• Marketplace factors
• Ageism (working against younger staff)
	• Buying in and working the system through:
	  – *impression management*
	  – *finding the right place to work*
	  – *attracting men back into public relations to bolster public relations' status*
	  – *learning how to fight for salaries*
	  – *insisting on inclusion in management decision making*
	  – *denying discrimination exists, to avoid a self-fulfilling prophecy*
	  – *making choices about work–life balance*
	• Developing the skills and knowledge needed in public relations
	• Demonstrating professionalism
	• Self-empowerment through networking
	• Radical feminist strategies including:
	  – *prescriptions for society, including a fundamental reassessment of societal values and renegotiating gender roles at home and in schools*
	  – *prescriptions for organisations, including redefining management to acknowledge and incorporate feminine attributes and changing organisational policies*
	  – *prescriptions for public relations, including educating management about the importance of the profession*

TABLE 9.2   Four levels of change to address women's position in public relations (*source:* based on Hon 1995: 65–79)

Societal	Organisational	Professional	Individual
• Raise levels of awareness about sexism • Elect women to high government posts • Introduce legislation to support working parents • Outlaw sexual harassment • Ensure affirmative action is effective • Ensure equal representation for woman in governmental organisations • Eradicate sexism in education • Break down gender stereotypes	• Establish family-friendly policies • Rethink the masculine ethic dominating most organisations • Value feminine attributes • Make recruitment, hiring and promotion criteria and processes more objective	• Devise specific strategies for overcoming the marginalisation of the function • Reassess undergraduate education • Incorporate women's perspectives in the curriculum	• Monitor behaviour • Create a persona of promotability • Join professional associations • Help other women • Become your own boss

profession precisely because it *is* dominated by women. Moreover, long-term changes in women's status could only occur if fundamental patterns of socialisation changed and expectations of women shifted to eliminate stereotypes and recognise the capabilities of women as individuals rather than members of a particular group. They also propose that attracting men back into the profession is essential for long-term professional credibility. Creedon (1991) goes further and argues that, as well as these fundamental changes outside the profession, the profession itself needs to examine its own assumptions and self-perceptions to redress current imbalances in the value attached to different PR roles.

The use in PR of values and attitudes traditionally associated with women have also been examined by researchers. Aldoory (1998) studied leadership styles of 10 female practitioners and educators. They tended to have a personal, interactive approach to their role. They used *transformational* or *interactional* leadership styles, adapting their approach and the language they used according to the situation they were in and aiming to motivate and inspire followers through cooperation and consultation. Grunig et al. (2000) compared feminist values with PR practice and suggested that *inclusivity*, respect, caring, cooperation, equity, self-determination and interconnection could enhance the ethical and effective practice of PR. In practice, educating young practitioners in these values is an important step towards integrating them into future PR practice.

> **Definition:** *Transformational*, *interactional and inclusive* refer to styles of management and leadership, employing negotiation and adjustment rather than hierarchy or command to make decisions.

It is important to note that while the results of these studies are both consistent and persuasive, some studies do differ in their results. Moss et al. (2004), for example, point out that in their study of senior managers, over half the respondents were women and their patterns of work did not differ significantly from their male counterparts, either in terms of the amount of involvement they had with senior management or the amount of technical tasks executed as a proportion of the overall role. They argue that it is possible that female practitioners in the UK have, at least in part, surmounted the glass ceiling in terms of the responsibilities they take on and are required to fulfil. However, their study did not address other inequities including salary rates, perceived competence or expectations of the managers themselves. These are important areas where research

so far is unanimous in its assessment of the relatively disadvantageous situation for women in PR.

Minority groups

Very little research has been conducted on the position of ethnic minorities within the PR profession, an omission that seems incomprehensible given the increasing diversity within the profession.

Marilyn Kern-Foxworth and her colleagues published an analysis of the managerial roles of black female practitioners in 1994 (Kern-Foxworth et al. 1994). The research was based on self-report questionnaires of black female practitioners, and assessed their roles within the profession. Respondents perceived themselves to be in meaningful roles, frequently managerial, within their organisations, providing strong problem-solving capabilities and valuable advice to management. Respondents' age, education and experience did not differ from previous studies of female practitioners generally, suggesting that affirmative action policies, if implemented, did not reduce the quality of practitioners recruited.

Zerbinos and Clanton (1993) conducted a quantitative survey and found that an interest in communications was the main determinant of career choice for minority PR practitioners. Neither career counsellors nor role models played a part, reflecting the general lack of knowledge about the profession as a whole. The majority of respondents had perceived some discrimination in their roles and almost half had considered leaving the field. However, in contrast, respondents also said that they were reasonably satisfied with the profession and 93% said they would encourage other minority individuals to join the field.

Len-Rios (1998), in a qualitative study of North American minority practitioners' perceptions of their roles, found similar patterns in that, despite progress in terms of opportunities for career advancement and satisfaction with roles, many respondents had experienced covert racial discrimination and felt that barriers to advancement for practitioners of colour still existed. Stereotyping, pigeonholing, positive and negative discrimination on the basis of race or colour, and having a role as 'the minority representative' were all commonly experienced. Len-Rios also emphasised the need to attract more minorities into the profession by increasing the visibility of existing minority practitioners and educating career advisors on PR and the opportunities it offered to minorities.

Kern-Foxworth et al. (1994) emphasised that their study was an initial examination of the roles occupied by black practitioners, and called for more research into the area. Unfortunately, this call has gone largely unheeded, particularly in the UK. As the range

PICTURE 9.1   The World Public Relations Festival in 2005 made diversity its theme. Will public relations become more inclusive? (*Source:* Methodos SPA, Italy)

activity 9.3

Women in public relations

Why do you think so many women work in PR? Ask fellow students and any practitioners:

- What attracted them to the profession?
- What might make them leave?
- Where do they see themselves in 5, 10 and 20 year's time?
- Do they think being female makes a difference to their career opportunities?

of ethnic groups entering the profession increases, greater understanding of their experiences in the profession, as well as a recognition of the new perspectives that they might bring to communication, would enrich the body of knowledge both in this area as well as in the field of PR as a whole (see Think about 9.3 and Activity 9.3.)
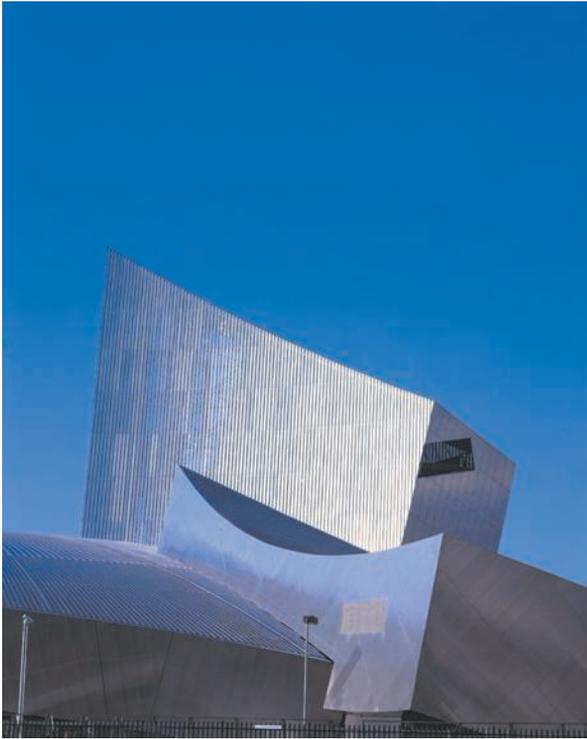
Postmodernism

Of all the alternative views of PR, postmodernist views challenge the very foundations of theory building so far. Derina Holtzhausen, in particular, has played a key role in integrating the postmodern approach into PR research and practice (Holtzhausen 2000; 2002) and this summary draws heavily on her work.

PR originates in the modernist paradigm and PR theories, insofar as they seek to present a single explanation or model for PR practice, are wedded to this worldview. Modernist theories and practices

think about 9.3 | Connecting with publics

How many students on your course are female? How many from ethnic minorities? What is the situation at PR offices you know from placement or part-time work? What problems do you think there might be in conducting a PR campaign to encourage Asian women to use the public swimming baths if no one in the office understands the cultural factors that might prevent some of them from taking part in mixed events? What about language problems?

PICTURE 9.2 Like postmodern architecture such as the Imperial War Museum in Manchester, public relations theory is increasingly controversial and debated by both academics and practitioners. Of all the alternative views of public relations, postmodernist views challenge the very foundations of theory building. (*Source:* © Richard Klune/Corbis.)

attempt to create single explanations, or *metanarratives,* that define the social environment. By definition, modernists using metanarratives ignore (or label as 'wrong') variability and phenomena that do not fit with their model. In contrast, postmodernists acknowledge variability and welcome the multiplicity of voices and views of reality that exist in society. Postmodernists do not reject *modernism* but argue that metanarratives have no inherent claim to superiority over other views. Instead, they should be integrated as one of many perspectives available.

Definition: *Modernism*, in PR, means an approach that legitimises the discourse of management and organisations as given and superior. Modernist PR attempts to reduce or eliminate crises, control publics and contribute to organisational effectiveness, usually measured in financial terms.

Definition: *Postmodernism*, in PR, is an approach that understands PR to generate perceived truths among publics through its role as a creator of organisational discourse. Recognition that the language used in PR also generates, sustains and shapes power relations in society.

Definition: *Metanarrative* means an attempt to make sense of the larger picture, or the wider social environment. Critical theorists and postmodernists (see below) suggest organisations and individuals use metanarratives as overarching explanations of the way the world works. They believe reliance on these 'stories' can prevent closer examination of reality.

Definition: *Discourse* here refers to particular ways of making sense of the world, communicated, sustained and justified through language and social institutions

A *postmodern* approach to PR can therefore accommodate differences in culture, gender, ethnicity and society in its analyses more effectively than modernist metanarratives. Postmodernists would argue that the overall explanations that characterise normative research, for example, are misguided because they can only ever approximate reality and cannot help practitioners in situations that do not conform to their parameters or expected frameworks. L'Etang (1996c) and Moloney (2000) echo this view when they argue that PR is multifaceted and cannot be defined in a single sentence.

The postmodern acceptance of plurality and diversity among audiences and practices has specific consequences for PR. First, it has implications in terms of the range of types of publics that practitioners affect in their work. Holtzhausen (2002) argues that the profession is facing a future characterised by ever greater fluidity and diversity in its audiences; if practitioners continue to try and present metanarratives to a fragmented world, they will simply fail. Instead, PR practitioners have a duty to act ethically in acknowledging other voices and pointing them out to the organisation when the need arises. As boundary-spanners between an organisation and its publics, practitioners must work reflexively, regularly reviewing how broad the range of perspectives is that they include in their strategies.

This sense of ethical responsibility emerges not least because postmodernists acknowledge the power of PR to create and sustain 'realities' for their audiences, indirectly communicating principles that support the organisations for which they work in a culturally acceptable manner. Postmodernists agree with critical theorists that PR is specifically used to perpetuate the existing system of power relations through, in particular, media relations activity. Extremes of this situation can result in practitioners creating 'hyperrealities' – the practice of representing realities that do not actually exist, through the use of symbols, codes and signs. Mickey (1997) illustrates exactly this process in his analysis of Hill and Knowlton's testimony before Congress on behalf of its client, Citizens for a Free Kuwait, which led to the US decision to go to war with Iraq in 1991. The testimony of a 15-year-old witness to the murder of Kuwaiti babies by Iraqi soldiers was later shown to be unreliable, as she

was related to the Kuwaiti royal family, coached by the PR agency and could not be proved to have been in the country at the time. But the power of her account almost certainly influenced the decision to go to war: hyperrealities can be extremely influential and prompt changes in society to benefit certain groups while excluding others – war being a case in point. This has significant ethical consequences for practitioners and should be explicitly recognised in both theory and practice (Holtzhausen 2002).

In line with critical theorists, postmodernists also argue that balanced, two-way communications is a myth. Members of the dominant coalition (business and government in particular) will always enjoy a more profitable negotiation. Given this, PR practitioners need to accept that their attempts to achieve consensus are equally hypothetical, and instead should be content with outcomes that are recognised to be incomplete for one party. In this way, they do not subsume alternative voices in the process of communication. This may cause some issues for practitioners, but only if the organisation has not recognised the existence of these voices in the first place (Holtzhausen 2000).

Holtzhausen (2000) also reformulates the PR role to one of the organisational activist: someone who brings about fundamental change within the organisation. She presents three types of activism:

1 *Community activist:* this practitioner integrates alternative views from the organisation's publics into communications strategies and makes management aware of their significance. For example, a practitioner developing a corporate social responsibility policy might start by conducting a survey of stakeholder opinions about the company and what kinds of activity they would view positively. She would take the results to senior management and make a recommendation about company policy based on the findings.

2 *Organisational activist:* this practitioner changes the status quo from within. They might work closely with the human resources department in order to generate inclusive internal communications principles and practices that are meaningful to all employees, regardless of gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

3 *Public relations activities themselves as a form of activism*, where strategies are designed to instigate change in societal norms or dominant policies. Practitioners developing such policies might work in the non-governmental sector, in environmental charities or organisations supporting particular social issues, such as Fathers for Justice or Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

In sum, PR practitioners face significant challenges from fragmented audiences, greater access to uncontrolled media, a more aggressive media, frequent challenges to government policies and to the principles of capitalism and globalisation, and a greater number of active publics. A postmodern perspective automatically acknowledges this fragmentation and diversity.

New research directions

A number of UK and European researchers, as well as some North American scholars, have integrated other theories into PR perspectives and produced alternative views of the field. A selection follows.

The public sphere and public relations

Perhaps one of the potentially most fruitful new research directions currently emerging in Europe is the integration of Habermas's concept of the public sphere with PR theory. While US researchers conceptualise PR as an organisational function, relating to individual publics as determined by the interests of the organisation, European academics more frequently examine the profession at the societal level, often using the public sphere as a starting point for understanding how both companies and their PR functions contribute to the development of social norms and values through discussion in this arena.

The public sphere was first conceptualised as an ideal by Jürgen Habermas (1989). Habermas argues that the public sphere is a social space that mediates, or provides space for negotiated understanding, between the political sphere and the private sphere. There are two types of public sphere: the *literary public sphere*, where individuals engage with various forms of the arts and culture in order to enhance their self-development and understanding; and the *political public sphere*, which constrains and influences the political sphere through free and open public discussion of government and legislative issues. The views that emerge from the political public sphere are understood to influence the development of the political sphere in democratic societies. Jensen (2001: 135) articulates succinctly some of the characteristics of the public sphere:

> *Thus, although the public sphere was originally thought of as being an assembly of citizens at a certain location or the population in general, it is* not *so today; yet it is dependent on freedom of assembly, association and speech. The public sphere is* not *the media; yet it is dependent on freedom of press and prevention of media monopolisation. The public sphere is* not *a set of common values, norms or opinions;* neither *is it the statistical result of opinion polls; yet it can influence institutionalised opinion – and will-formation in society. The public sphere is* not *the sum or aggregation of individual, private preferences, values and beliefs,* although it *depends on protection of 'privacy', the integrity of*

private life spheres: rights of personality, freedom of be-
lief and of conscience. The public sphere is not *obliged*
or normally able to come to an agreement or a decision;
yet it can influence decisions made by individuals, insti-
tutionalised associations and government.

Habermas's concept of the public sphere has been criticised in particular for representing an ideal that has never existed (Moloney 2000). Habermas would not argue with this view, instead suggesting that the *ideals* of the public sphere – free and open, rational discussion among equals – are desirable and should be a characteristic of modern democracies. However, he says, the commercialisation of the public sphere has distorted communication to the extent that discussions are driven by vested interests rather than being open, rational arguments – to the detriment of democracy (Habermas 1989).

Jensen (2001) has articulated the most comprehensive analytical framework centred on the public sphere, relevant to PR. She proposes a redefinition of the public sphere, recognising the fact that discussions in this arena are presented as being of general public concern, but also accommodating the fact that within the public sphere, multiple different discourses compete simultaneously, mainly through attempting to raise their views in the media and other public fora, or meeting places. She suggests that the public sphere be treated as an 'analytical concept, referring to the discursive processes in a complex network of persons, institutionalised associations and organisations' (2001: 136). Because these various discourses compete, the public sphere is characterised by disagreement rather than agreement. She also suggests an addition to the literary and political public spheres already introduced by Habermas: namely, the public sphere processes of *organisational legitimacy and identity*. It is here that PR is particularly relevant, since it plays a key role in engaging organisations in this part of the public sphere in order to both promote and justify particular organisational identities and 'ways of being'.

Jensen implies that these different elements of the public sphere all influence each other; social expectations change over time as a result of the interaction between discourses in the public sphere. In terms of the development of organisational legitimacy and identity, for example, social expectations of organisational behaviour will influence which discourses are acceptable, while discourses about responsible organisations reduce the discourses present in the political public sphere, which argue for regulation of company activities through purely legislative means. This is most obvious in the areas of corporate social responsibility (see Chapters 6 and 18), where economically successful and legal companies may still be

subject to public wrath because they have not taken into account social expectations of corporate responsibility. Economic and legal arguments are of little use when competing against morality.

Integration of the public sphere as an analytical perspective for PR also modifies the concepts of publics traditionally used in normative PR theories. Both Jensen (2001) and Ihlen (2004) argue that traditional conceptions of stakeholder and publics both neglect the interactive, discursive processes that characterise PR activities in the public sphere and fail to explain why particular organisational discourses become a matter for public interest. They therefore omit an important understanding of the operation and effect of PR activities on such groups. Raupp (2004) also argues that PR should recognise that the different publics dealt with by organisations also form part of the public sphere and therefore take part in other, competing discourses – as well as participating in the same discourse on different levels.

Moloney (2000) takes a different view of the utility of the concept of the public sphere. He suggests a redefinition of the public sphere, given the fact that the utopian ideal does not exist, and suggests we now live in a *persuasive* sphere, where citizens must make sense of myriad messages about the merits of a vast range of products, policies and issues. He argues that PR practitioners who set out to persuade should do so in a way that ensures balance between the views that they represent and others who do not have the advantage of membership in the dominant coalition. He also highlights the responsibility of those on the receiving end of persuasive communications, who must actively, not passively 'read' messages and judge them on the basis of their origins and context. This perspective focuses on the groups taking part in the discussions of the public sphere and places responsibility for the quality of those discussions on their readiness to recognise the implications of their position.

For PR, the ethics of practice and content therefore become an important focus. However, ethics and the nature of ethics in PR is itself a widely debated area and the institution of common norms has not been successful in the past (see Chapter 15 for a discussion of ethics). Moreover, the ability and awareness of different members of the public to 'actively read' persuasive messages will differ widely; those who are already socially disadvantaged (for example, by lower levels of education) may be unable or unwilling to engage at this level. While Moloney may well be correct in that we live in a more persuasive than public sphere, the ability to counter this persuasion with greater responsibility from all parties may be easier to achieve in theory than in reality.

Constructivist public relations

Merten (2004) offers a *constructivist* interpretation of PR. The constructivist perspective underpins postmodernism as well as rhetorical theory and argues that PR constructs 'realities' through the promotion of particular dialogues (for example, consumerism or the value of choice). One of the main channels through which this occurs is the media; since journalists are ever more reliant on PR sources for news stories, the power of PR to create reality is increasing.

Merten points out that journalists used to present representations of realities, which were trusted because journalists were usually present at the event being described. However, news outlets and coverage options have widened considerably and journalists can no longer be present for each and every news story. PR acts as an intermediary, providing content to fill the space. However, these third-hand stories are never differentiated. They carry the same kudos as original news stories and are treated as equally real.

From the constructivist perspective then, reality has in fact become a combination of authentic reality (observed first hand) and the representations, or fictions, produced by PR practitioners, among others, which appear in the news. Obviously, the power of PR is significant since it is now in a position to do two things:

1 provide a selection of realities from which journalists can choose to create a story
2 define which events are in the public interest by providing representations and discourses that are only relevant to these events.

A constructivist view of PR has major ethical implications for practitioners. At the very least, they must take seriously the influence they have and understand how their activities can change or sustain inequities in society.

Summary

We live and work in a postmodern world; audiences are fragmented rather than singular and solutions are needed to tackle complex situations. Longino (1996) argues that a successful search for knowledge need not be determined by a final outcome on which all agree. Instead, knowledge may be defined as greater understanding of a particular phenomenon. Furthering knowledge, then, means including new perspectives to generate greater understanding.

PR sits at the intersection of a wide range of both academic and practical disciplines. It is therefore appropriate that we learn more about our own area by integrating other understandings into our body of knowledge. By developing theory in this way, we will offer practitioners not prescriptive solutions, but a range of choices from which they can select options that meet their particular needs. In this way, theory can and will be of genuine help to PR practice.

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