CHAPTER 12

Audiences, stakeholders, publics

Introduction

The planning and conduct of public relations depends on our understanding of the nature of audiences, stakeholders or publics, i.e. the theories of audiences, stakeholders or publics that we hold. These in turn are an integral part of our understanding, or theories, of public relations and communication. People working in public relations, whether academics or practitioners, understand these objects or phenomena in different ways. These different theories may be complementary or they may be contradictory.

Theories, concepts and models of audiences, stakeholders or publics, public relations and communication are important because they help us understand and explain our public relations campaigns and the situations these campaigns address. They determine how we plan and conduct public relations. Thus the different theories we hold will lead to different ways of planning and practising public relations.

How we understand audiences, stakeholders or publics relates to the theories of public relations and communication (see Chapters 8 and 9 for more about theory) that we hold. The way communicators imagine their audience affects the way they communicate with that audience; it changes the relationship.

This chapter contrasts the concepts of passive and active audiences before considering stakeholder theory and the situational theory of publics. A case study is presented which takes another look at how publics have been or could be regarded. The chapter concludes by considering some new thinking about publics and their role in communication campaigns.

The passive audience

Communication and public relations are directed at audiences and stakeholders or publics, often via the mass media. Mass media have traditionally been seen as having a mass audience. The concept 'mass' has been understood not merely as large in terms of numbers but rather as a large mass of isolated, anonymous and unorganised individuals. The negative connotations implied by the concept of 'mass' included the mass being seen to be unintelligent, having poor taste and lacking in judgement. Hence the mass was passive, easily influenced and manipulated (Ang 1995).

European and American social theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw mass society, mass culture and the mass audience as arising from industrialisation and urbanisation. Social change and the shift of populations from rural villages to industrial cities were believed to have brought about social disintegration and the breakdown of traditional ties (McQuail 2000: 37). Emile Durkheim (1893–1972), one of the nineteenth-century founding fathers of sociology, defined *anomie* as the condition prevalent in societies undergoing transformation, in which individuals suffered from a lack of standards or values, and an associated feeling of alienation and purposelessness. Thus the individual was isolated from their fellow men, unorganised and hence susceptible to negative influence and manipulation.

The masses thus had to be protected, and as much from their own vulgarity as anything else. On the one hand, the development of industrial capitalist society had given rise to the vulnerable masses and the passive audience in need of protection. On the other hand, despite their vulgarity, lack of intelligence, taste and judgement, sheer numbers meant that the masses would be part of the transformation of a society undergoing structural change. In fact, the masses constituted much of society as workers, consumers and, after the establishment of universal suffrage in 1918 in the UK, as voters. Given their vulgarity and susceptibility to manipulation, this influence would inevitably be negative.

Matthew Arnold, the Victorian poet and literary critic, believed that high culture, i.e. the culture that was most highly valued by the elite and which he defined as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world' (1882), had to be protected from vulgar, popular culture. Thus, traditional society had to be preserved from both the vulgar masses and the radical social changes that had produced these masses. The passivity and vulnerability that made protection of the masses necessary also meant that the masses could be protected and protected against, by virtue of that very same passivity. The practice of public relations in the UK in the early twentieth century sought to ensure and communicate the stability and continuity of traditional culture and society. The masses, their opinions and behaviour, had to be managed through education and propaganda (Moloney 2000). The then British Broadcasting Company was founded in 1922 on a public service broadcasting ethos of educating, informing and entertaining, i.e. the propagation of high culture to the mass audience. It reflects the view of the audience as passive, as both capable of being, and needing to be, influenced. John Reith, the first Director-General of the BBC, declared: 'It is occasionally indicated to us that we are setting out to give the public what we think they need – and not what they want – but very few people know what they want and very few what they need' (cited in Cain 1992: 40).

Similarly, John Grierson, the father of the documentary film, wrote:

> The British documentary group began not so much in affection for film per se as in affection for national education . . . its origins lay in sociological rather than aesthetic aims . . . We . . . turned to the new wide-reaching instruments of radio and cinema as necessary instruments in both the practice of government and the enjoyment of citizenship. (Grierson 1946/1979: 78)

Thus John Reith and the BBC, as much as Stephen Tallents, John Grierson and the Empire Marketing Board, are key players in early twentieth-century public relations in the UK, despite the myths of public relations being distinct from the media it seeks to influence, and of the objectivity and impartiality of the BBC. Reith secretly wrote propaganda for the Conservative Baldwin government during the General Strike of 1926 and noted in his diaries that impartiality was a principle to be suspended whenever the established order and its consensus were threatened (cited in Pilger 2003). The object of the attention of this public relations of the early twentieth century was an audience seen to be passive and thus both needing to be, and capable of being, influenced.

Defining the passive audience

How can we understand the passiveness of the audience? The 'passive' audience (or at least the audience that is seen as being passive) passively responds to and accepts media content, rather than actively engaging intellectually and emotionally with it. Thus this passivity is defined primarily in terms of the strong effects that media communication is believed to have on the audience and the corresponding role

assigned to the audience in communication. An example of contemporary concern surrounding strong *media effects* is the perceived ability of violent scenes shown on television or in film to incite violent acts among vulnerable audiences such as children and teenagers.

> **Definition:** *Media effects* refers to the effects that the media has on audiences as a result of the audiences being exposed to the media and its content.

The development of the mass media, from newspapers to film and radio, was accompanied by both (a) the fear that the media would have powerful effects on audiences that would be detrimental to both audiences and society and (b) the desire to use these media for propaganda to, and public relations with, these audiences.

The *hypodermic model* or 'magic bullet theory' of media effects posits not only that the media have strong effects but that the effects of messages 'injected into' or 'shot at' passive, mass audiences would be uniform; much as the physical effects of being injected or shot at are uniform. Although perhaps no one, or at least not academics, actually believed in the hypodermic model, at least with respect to themselves, nonetheless in some sense the media are thought to have strong effects on audiences on account of their passivity. Thus governments, businesses and other elite interests communicate through the mass media to influence audiences. Thus '*moral panics'* have arisen about the alleged effects of media aggravating crime and violence (Cumberbatch 2002).

> **Definition:** *Moral panic* refers to an 'episode, condition, person or group of persons' that is 'defined as a threat to societal values and interests' by 'stylized and stereotypical' representation by the media, and condemnation by those 'in power' (politicians and the church) (Cohen 1972: 9).

The passivity of the audience, and the strong effects that media communication has on the audience, imply a correspondingly subordinate role assigned to the audience in communication. This understanding of media effects, the audience and communication is represented in the *linear (*also called the *transport, transmission* or *process) model* of communication, of which Shannon and Weaver's model (1949) is an example (see Chapter 8).

The linear model portrays the messages and meanings in communication as if they were physical things to be transported, much as the hypodermic model portrays media effects as physical effects mechanically inflicted. Carey (1989) writes that in the nineteenth century the word 'communication' referred both to the communication of messages as well as the transportation of people and goods by road, rail or ship. Thus the transport of the physical medium that messages were transcribed on, such as letters and books, was easily confused with the communication of messages and the meanings that were read into these messages.

The linear model of communication portrays messages and their meanings as being transported intact from sender to receiver like physical things (Schirato and Yell 2000). The sender is privileged in that they communicate and decide what the correct message and its meaning is. The receiver can merely passively accept what the sender says. Any difference in interpretation and opinion is taken to be misinterpretation and misunderstanding, as 'noise', a concept Weaver adapted from Shannon's original description of signal loss in telecommunications. The audience is limited to feedback, a concept from cybernetics merely describing a test of the success or failure of the sender's communication in order to allow adaptation of subsequent communication to ensure future success (Rogers 1994).

Raymond Williams, the father of media and cultural studies in the UK, wrote that 'there are in fact no "masses", but only ways of seeing people as masses' (1961: 281). The mass was either the elitist and moralistic way in which high culture saw popular culture in others or a way of seeing others in the formation and management of audiences to serve the interests of government, business and other elites. As such, we include others rather than ourselves in the mass audience. In the same way, strong media effects are often seen as third-person effects: they occur to others rather than ourselves. We personally are more sophisticated and less passive and vulnerable (Davison 1983).

Hermes (2002) states that academic research is conducted into how media influence works in order that we may guard against it. Often enough, however, mass communications research has been motivated just as much, if not more so, to enable government, media and other businesses and their public relations and advertising practitioners to take advantage of media influence over audiences. In fact, mass communication and market research share common roots in the work of Paul Lazarsfeld, at Princeton and then Columbia University in the USA in the 1930s and 1940s (Rogers 1994). Rather than reflect communication realistically, linear models were adopted to serve the strategic and political needs of political and business communication (Schirato and Yell 2000). (See Think about 12.1, overleaf.)

PICTURE 12.1   A Moonie wedding: is this a passive audience? (*Source:* © Gideon Mendel/Corbis.)

The active audience

If audiences are neither mass nor, as Cutlip et al. (2000) claim, passive, what would an 'active' audience be? Hermes (2002) asks in what sense are audiences 'active', what is the nature of this audience activity? *Uses and gratifications theory* focuses attention not on what media do to audiences but rather, what *audiences do with media*. Media audiences are active in their choice of media. Media choice is selective and motivated (i.e. rational and goal directed). Audiences use media in expectation of gratification of their individual social and psychological needs. Thus audience activity is seen not in the taking or making of meaning, but in the active and intentional selection of media to be used to satisfy individual needs. Audiences are formed on the basis of common needs for which satisfaction is sought. Such gratifications sought may include the need for information, the formation of personal identity, achieving social integration and interaction, and the desire for entertainment (Katz et al. 1974).

McQuail (1984) criticises uses and gratifications theory in that it does not reflect much media use, which tends to be circumstantial and weakly motivated, and also for its behaviourist and functionalist assumptions, i.e. it ignores what lies behind behaviour and functions. For example, uses and gratifications theory sees media use in terms of the individual and ignores the fact that media use is social; it also ignores media content and how audiences understand these and it implicitly acts as justification of media as it is, i.e. the media are seen as responsive to audience needs (Ang 1995). (See Think about 12.2.)

Understanding audience activity

Uses and gratifications theory limits audience activity to the selection of media to be used to satisfy needs. It does not engage with the role of audiences in understanding and creating meanings. However, a richer understanding of the audience and its activity needs to reflect the different and complex ways in which the media are used and what the media mean for users as a social and cultural activity (Ang 1995). Thus audience activity needs to be defined in terms of the active role audiences play in the construction of meaning that takes place in communication. The concept of the active audience rejects the privileging of the sender as the authority that decides the meaning of the message that is found in the linear model of communication.

Reception analysis is the study of audience activity in making or producing, not merely taking or consuming, meanings from media communication. The meaning of media messages is not fixed by the sender in the media text. Rather, meaning is constructed or negotiated by audiences when they interpret what they see, hear and read in media communication. This active reading and interpretation of media content takes place within the social and cultural environments that audiences live in. The context of meaning production includes the social power relations that audiences are in. Thus the construction of meaning and the audience use of media takes place within, and is integrated into, the circumstances of everyday life (Ang 1995; Schirato and Yell 2000).

This understanding of the active audience and communication is represented in the cultural model of communication, or the idea of communication as culture (Carey 1989; Schirato and Yell 2000). Culture is understood as systems of meaning consisting of rules, conventions that constitute communication practices. Communication is the practice of producing and negotiating meanings. The particular social and cultural contexts that audiences live in depend on factors such as class, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual preference, etc. and the power relations that these imply.

In contrast to the unique meanings that messages are supposed to have in the linear model of communication, the cultural model asserts the *polysemy of communication*, i.e. messages are always open to different possible interpretations. Stuart Hall's (1973/1980) encoding/decoding model classifies these different possible meanings that can be read into a message into preferred, negotiated and oppositional 'readings':

- Preferred or dominant readings are in agreement with the sender's intentions.
- Oppositional readings disagree with and reject the sender's message.
- Negotiated readings represent a compromise in partial agreement with the sender's meanings.

Thus the understanding of communication as culture distinguishes between the audience misunderstanding the intentions of the sender, on the one hand, and the audience understanding but choosing to read the message in opposition to the sender's interpretation on the other. Further, it does not assume by default that audience readings different from the sender's are in fact misunderstandings and miscommunication, i.e. 'noise'. On the contrary, the very nature of communication as culture means that messages will inevitably be, at least to some extent, read and interpreted differently by different people because of each person's specific contexts. Not only is there no necessary correspondence between the sender's and the audience's meanings, there is, of necessity, at least some difference in meanings offered and accepted. The problem presented by the linear model is turned on its head – what needs to be explained is not so much difference but rather agreement in the construction of meaning. For if the preferred or dominant reading prevails, it does so through the limits and constraints imposed by power (Ang 1996; Schirato and Yell 2000). (See Think about 12.3, overleaf.)

think about 12.3   Alternative readings

In the 2005 general election campaign, Tony Blair wrote an open letter to *Daily Mirror* readers (6 April 2005). He wrote that those who voted for Labour were the people who ended Conservative party rule in 1997 and 2001. He asserted that Labour had since built a more prosperous and fairer Britain, with low inflation, mortgage rates and unemployment, better public services and lower crime. Blair wanted to further extend opportunity and continue to protect Britain from security threats. There may have been big disagreements, e.g. over Iraq, but voters who wanted Britain to continue moving forward rather than go back to the Conservatives should vote Labour:

■ What is Blair's message? Who (different possible groups) might accept the preferred reading of Blair's message?
■ What would oppositional and negotiated readings of Blair's message look like? Who might hold these oppositional and negotiated readings?
■ Would anyone or any group that may have suffered as a result of Blair's policies, e.g. parents/spouses/children who have lost children/spouses/parents who served in Iraq subscribe to Blair's preferred reading?
■ Would anyone or any group that may have benefited as a result of Blair's policies, e.g. people who have seen the kind of improvements described in his letter, not subscribe to Blair's preferred reading?

Audience activity and media effects

The long history of research into media effects has not resulted in a consensus among media scholars on the strength or nature of the influence that the media may have over audiences. Perhaps Schramm et al. (1961: 13) sum up media effects research best:

For some children under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children under most conditions television is probably neither harmful nor particularly beneficial.

The failure to find powerful effects could be down to the complexity of the processes and the inadequacy of research designs and methods. This might mean not that media are without effects or influence but that these effects or influence are not of a direct causal nature along the lines of mechanical effects. McQuail (2000) believes that what he calls the 'no effect' myth arises from the undue concentration in the research undertaken on a limited range of effects, especially short-term effects on violent behaviour, instead of broader social and institutional effects. Thus research still seeks to identify potential effects of the media but conceptions of the social and media processes involved have been revised. There has been a shift of attention to long-term change in cognitions rather than attitudes and affect (feelings) and to collective phenomena such as climates of opinion, structures of beliefs, ideologies, cultural patterns and institutional forms of media provision and intervening variables of context, disposition and motivation. In other words, the potential effect of the media depends on an individual's circumstances and how these interact with complex social and cultural conditions.

Kitzinger (2002) suggests that rather than the narrow conception of media effects found in mass communications theory, the 'new effects research' on how the world is represented in the media, and the ideology and discourse that lie behind these representations, has proved more fruitful in understanding how the media affects audiences. Media representations of the world can influence how audiences understand and engage with that world they live in. Language and meaning structures and shapes our perception of reality, and how we define, understand and value the world around us.

Understanding 'communication as culture' recognises that the media are influential. However, rather than strong media effects that affect a passive audience in a mechanical way, media influence is seen to involve audience participation and is negotiated. The most significant media effect is seen to be the role that media play in audience's social construction of meaning. The media offer their messages and meanings to audiences. It is then up to the audience how they read these messages and the extent to which they incorporate these into their understanding or sense of reality of the world they live in (McQuail 2000). (See Think about 12.4.)

Stakeholders and publics

The concept of the stakeholder originates in political theory. Interest in the concept of the corporate stakeholder arose in the debate on corporate governance during the 1980s climate of companies taking over other companies in the USA (Freeman 1984). The debate was about making companies responsive to shareholders' interests but stakeholding ideas emerged as an alternative way of understanding the interests at stake. Stakeholders are those who have a stake or interest in a particular organisation, i.e. 'they depend on the organisation to fulfil their own goals and on whom, in turn, the organisation depends' (Johnson and Scholes 2002: 206). Thus stakeholders are those who influence or can influence the organisation, as well as those affected by it. An organisation's stakeholders would include its employees and their trade unions, financial investors, customers, suppliers, distributors, the local community, local and central government, industry groups and the media (see Figure 12.1).

The distinction between stakeholders and publics is not a sharp one. Sometimes both terms are used interchangeably. Others, like Grunig and Hunt (1984: 145) for instance, distinguish publics as stakeholders that face a problem or have an issue with the organisation. (See also Chapter 8.)

Thus stakeholders are potential publics, the critical factor being the arrival of a problem or issue. The risk to the organisation is that when such a problem or issue arises, stakeholders organise to become publics and are able to affect the interests of the organisation. Some of McDonald's customers become a public when they become concerned about their diet and obesity, and organise to campaign for more healthy menus and government regulation of food advertising on television targeted at children. Rover workers at Longbridge, the UK car manufacturing plant, become a public when they organise to protest at the loss of their jobs.

Stakeholder mapping

Stakeholders should be considered at the first stage of strategic management, in environmental scanning and situation analysis to identify the consequences of the organisation's behaviour on the stakeholders and vice versa, to anticipate any possible issues and problems. Grunig and Repper (1992) sees communication at the stakeholder stage as helping to develop the stable, long-term relationships that an organisation needs to build support and to manage conflict when issues and problems arise. (See also Chapters 2 and 10.)

Relevant factors that are considered in the mapping of stakeholders include their possible impact on the organisation and hence their interests, expectations, needs and power. Individuals may belong to more than one stakeholder group. Employees often live in the local community where their employers are located and also own shares in the company.

Johnson and Scholes (2002), writing on corporate strategy, consider how likely stakeholders are to press their expectations on the organisation to suggest strategies to contain or manage stakeholders. They consider how much interest stakeholders have in potential issues and problems with the organisation, whether they have the means to push their interests and how predictable they would be. They map the
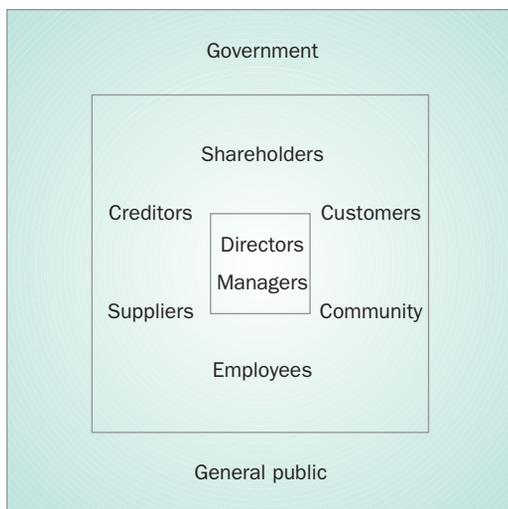

FIGURE 12.1   Stakeholders (*source:* Letza et al. 2004: 243)

mini case study 12.1

Applying stakeholder mapping

Fast food companies and the obesity issue

In the past few years, government departments and agencies, MPs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the health professions have raised concern about the growing obesity problem in the UK and the role of fast food companies such as hamburger chains. Concern has centred not just on the nature of the food products sold but how they have been promoted, particularly in television advertising.

How would a fast food company map and decide the relative importance of its various stakeholders in the obesity issue? What aims and objectives, and strategies and tactics did McDonald's adopt?

Stakeholders relevant to the obesity issue can be grouped into government departments and agencies, customers and potential customers, NGOs such as the Food Commission and the British Medical Association, other companies and trade bodies in the food and advertising industry (such as the Advertising Association and its Food Advertising Unit) and members of the public who were not customers.

These stakeholders are mapped in the matrix below according to their levels of power and interest. In addition, a '+' indicates that the stakeholder is broadly supportive of the fast food company on the issue, while a '−' indicates the opposite. One of the issues for fast food companies was the House of Commons' Health Select Committee's recommendation of a ban on the advertising of junk food to children being adopted in the government's White Paper on health and then subsequently becoming law. Both the Department of Health and government agencies such as the Food Standards Agency were in favour of stricter government regulation of junk food advertising. These were stakeholders that were both powerful and interested, but not supportive of the position of fast food companies.

Members of the food industry, i.e. other food companies, and industry bodies such as the Advertising Association were powerful and interested stakeholders that shared common interests with McDonald's on this issue. These were also supported by other powerful and interested stakeholders in government. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport was concerned about the impact of a junk food advertising ban on the revenues of the commercial television industry. Tessa Jowell, the Culture Secretary, dismissed calls for restrictions early in the debate and called instead for the advertising industry and their clients in the food industry to use their creativity to help in anti-obesity campaigns. In particular, McDonald's responded with the Yum Chums, cartoon characters exhorting children to have a healthy diet and to exercise.

McDonald's also implemented changes to its menu. It reduced the salt in its fries, stopped the practice of super-sizing meals, and introduced a new menu including salads and fruits in March 2004. It introduced a new breakfast menu including oat porridge and bagels in October 2004. It also ran campaigns, such as 'McDonalds, but not as you know it', to promote these changes.

Such changes in the policies and products of fast food companies tell interested stakeholders, such as the government, NGOS, and the health and diet-conscious members of the public who may be customers, potential customers or potential activists, that some fast food companies offer a healthy menu (at least now, if not in the past), promote their food responsibly, are worthy of their custom and can be trusted to self-regulate their promotional activities.

		Level of interest	
		Low	High
Power	Low	Non-customers not conscious about health and diet	Health and diet-conscious non-customers (–) NGOs such as the Food Commission (–)
	High	(Potential) customers not conscious about health and diet	Other food companies and the food industry (+) Department of Culture, Media and Sport and government media agencies such as Ofcom (+) Department of Health and government health and food agencies such as the Food Standards Agency (–) Commons Health Select Committee (–) Health and diet-conscious (potential) customers (–)

The White Paper on health was published in November 2004. There was no ban on junk food advertising, just a promise to consult on working out a strategy on food promotion in the next few years. This outcome would have been the result of lobbying by those sympathetic to the food industry, both within and outside the government. However, the campaigns conducted by fast food companies consisting of both their actions and communications would have helped the case of the food industry.

power of the stakeholders against both their level of interest in the issue and the predictability of their behaviour.

If the stakeholders have both a high level of power and interest, then they are key players crucial to the welfare of the organisation. If they are powerful but have merely low interest in the issue, the organisation would do well to keep things that way by keeping them satisfied as that would not require much effort. If they are highly interested but lack power, then all the organisation needs to do is merely to keep them informed. Likewise, powerful but unpredictable stakeholders present the greatest opportunity and threat to the organisation's interests. Thus in situation analysis, stakeholders are mapped and their importance weighted accordingly. (See Chapter 10 for explanation of the power/interest matrix; see also Mini case study 12.1.)

Situational theory of publics

Stakeholders are contained, or at least relationships with them are managed, in order to prevent them developing into publics that may organise against the organisation. Grunig and Hunt's situational theory of publics (1984) examines why and when publics are formed and most likely to communicate, how their predicted communication and behaviour can be used to segment publics in order to provide a basis for deciding what strategy is most likely to achieve cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural effects in the publics (see Table 12.1). The theory sees stakeholders developing into publics when they recognise that an issue or problem affecting them exists and they see it as worth their while getting involved with the issue or problem. Latent publics do not as yet recognise the issue or problem they are facing with the organisation. Aware publics recognise that the issue or problem exists and active publics organise to discuss and respond to the issue or problem. Thus the company's customers who face obesity and health problems but who do not see it as a problem would constitute a latent public. It is only customers who are not only aware of the problem but also organise to act on the problem, e.g. changing their diet, campaigning for menu changes and regulation of advertising, that make an active public. It would thus be in the company's interests to address

the issue while most of its customers are still latent or aware publics, rather than wait until the active public has reached sizeable numbers.

The situational theory further classifies publics on the basis of the range of issues to which they are responsive:

- Apathetic publics disregard all issues/problems.
- Single-issue publics are active on a small set of issues/problems that has limited popular appeal (i.e. fringe activist groups).
- Hot-issue publics are active on a single issue that has significant appeal (e.g. the anti-war movement).
- All-issue publics are active across a wide range of issues/problems.

Both Johnson and Scholes' (2002) stakeholder mapping and Grunig and Hunt's (1984) situational theory of publics are classification or segmentation tools in the execution of strategy to manage and contain the impact of publics on organisations – they are practical techniques for realising publics as subjects that public relations practitioners do things to. However, looked at another way, theories of publics and stakeholder analysis are vulnerable to Raymond Williams' charge that 'there are no masses, only ways of seeing people as masses' (1961: 281). (See Box 12.1 and Think about 12.5, overleaf.)

Mini case study 12.2 (overleaf) illustrates and summarises the various conceptions of audiences and stakeholders or publics that we have considered so far in this chapter. We then go on to look at new, alternative ways of thinking about publics.

New thinking on publics

The different ways of understanding audiences, stakeholders and publics – i.e. passive or active, nature of activity, their importance to and ability to affect the organisation – affect our understanding of communication and public relations and hence the way we plan and conduct public relations.

The starting point for alternative thinking on publics, different from the way Shell frames its publics as incompetent and hence ignorant, has to

TABLE 12.1   The situational theory of publics (*source:* adapted from Grunig and Hunt 1984: 145)

Latent publics	Groups that face a particular problem as a result of an organisation's action, but fail to recognise it.
Aware publics	Groups that recognise that a problem exists.
Active publics	Groups that organise to discuss and do something about the problem.

<table>
<tr><td>box
12.1</td><td>Stakeholders or publics?</td></tr>
</table>

Sometimes the words stakeholders and publics are used interchangeably, so what is the difference?

Grunig and Repper (1992: 125) describe the difference thus: 'People are stakeholders because they are in a category affected by decisions of an organisation or if their decision affects the organisation. Many people in a category of stakeholders – such as employees or residents of a community – are passive. The stakeholders who are or become more aware and active can be described as publics.'

'Publics form when stakeholders recognise one or more of the consequences (of the behaviour of the organisation) as a problem and organise to do something about it or them' (1992: 124).

As Davis (2004: 59) points out, 'publics sound more important than stakeholders'. However, he goes on to say that some groups, for example pressure and cause-related groups, do not form out of a stakeholder mass: they exist as publics immediately because, by definition, they are active. Furthermore, it is clear that not all publics are active (Grunig himself recognises apathetic publics – Grunig and Repper 1992) and they are not always adversarial. Davis (2004: 59) defines the groups thus: 'Publics have an importance attached to them because of their specific interest and power, current and potential, while for stakeholders the levels of interest and influence are relatively lower and more generalised.'

The person regarded as largely responsible for stakeholder theory, Freeman (1984), accepts that 'the term means different things to different people' (Phillips et al. 2003: 479), but goes on to say that it encompasses a particular and close relationship between an organisation. His co-author Phillips (Phillips et al. 2003) differentiates between normative stakeholders (to whom an organisation has a direct moral obligation to look after their well-being, for example financers, employees and customers), and derivative stakeholders (who can harm or benefit the organisation, but to whom there is no direct moral obligation – for example, competitors, activists and the media).

be Williams' 'there are no masses, only ways of seeing people as masses' (1961: 281). Ways of seeing involve the exercise of power in the social construction of reality, i.e. that human beings make the world they live in. Karlberg (1996) and Moffitt (1994) claim that organisations see publics from the narrow perspective of their own interests rather than that of their publics.

To move away from this narrow perspective, and like Holtzhausen (2000), Chay-Nemeth (2001) asserts that the ethical practice of public relations should focus on empowering and giving voice to disempowered and silent publics. She goes on to suggest how this may be done in practical terms by a typology based not on the power, interest or actions of a public to affect the organisation, but on the ability of the public to participate in the issues in which they have a stake.

She conceives of a public as a political space or site where power plays out, material resources and discourses (i.e. ideas, concepts, language and assumptions) are produced and reproduced, exchanged and appropriated, to achieve social and political change or to maintain the status quo. Communication is not simply about information exchange but a practice of power relations. Hence publics are not merely senders or receivers of information but also producers and reproducers of meaning.

In her conception of publics and power, she applies Foucault's (1991) concept of governmentality, where

<table>
<tr><td>think about 12.5</td><td>Publics</td></tr>
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Consider a recent public relations campaign that you have come across, organised or been the target of.

■ How did the campaign view the publics involved? As latent, aware or active publics?
■ What publics do you belong to? How active are you in these roles?

Feedback Does stakeholder mapping and/or the situational theory of publics view audiences and/or stakeholders/publics as passive subjects that public relations practitioners do things to? Or as active and hence needing to be managed and contained in the organisation's interests?

You might be a member of the following publics: student body, course member, group or society member, resident in an area near your place of study, ex-member of your school, place you grew up in, and so on. What factors affect your activity in these publics?

mini case study 12.2

Shell's publics

How does Shell understand its publics, particularly in the Brent Spar case and the corporate recovery strategy Shell embarked on after Brent Spar?

In 1995, Shell's plans to dispose of the Brent Spar oil platform by sinking it 150 miles west of the Hebrides met with fierce opposition from Greenpeace Germany. The Greenpeace campaign attracted much attention and support from the media, European governments, Shell's customers and the public. Shell backed down and reversed its decision. It commissioned an independent survey by the Norwegian ship classification society, Den Norske Veritas, and looked at 200 possible options. It subsequently dismantled and recycled the platform, in part as a roll-on, roll-off ship quay in Norway (Varey 1997; Henderson and Williams 2001).

Varey asserts that Shell had made a perfectly rational decision and chosen the best, most practical option of sinking the platform on the basis of cost–benefit analysis of business, technical and environmental considerations. Various onshore and offshore abandonment options were considered. Rudall Blanchard Associates Ltd, an environmental consultancy, was commissioned to report on the environmental impacts of sinking the platform.

In contrast to Shell's scientific and technical rigour and objectivity, Varey describes the Greenpeace campaign as manipulation of both the media and 'people's feelings about . . . apparent injustice'. Nonetheless, public outcry driven by emotions and a lack of understanding of Shell's 'rational, scientifically sound decision' led to the reversal of that well-made decision (Varey 1997: 104–105). Similarly, Henderson and Williams (2001:13), who have both been involved in public relations for Shell, write of Shell's 'knowledge gap' problem in its corporate recovery campaign. Its publics just did not understand Shell's values and approach, i.e. how good Shell really was, particularly on the environment and human rights. Further, facts alone were not enough and Shell had to engage the emotions of its publics.

Before you continue reading this case, answer the questions in Think about 12.6.

How justified is Varey's and Shell's view of Shell's publics? Varey praises Shell's analysis as 'apparently very thorough. Over four years was spent in getting DTI [i.e. British government's] approval for the plan'. But read between the lines and you will see that this was not an objective, scientific Shell against an emotional, irrational public. Shell may have spent four years lobbying the DTI while Rudall Blanchard's environmental report was published only six months before the planned sinking.

Varey tells us that Shell commissioned an independent survey, by the Norwegian ship classification society, Den Norske Veritas, only after the Greenpeace campaign. Instead of the several options considered earlier in its scientifically sound analysis, Shell was now looking at 200 possible options.

We can understand Shell's 'rational, scientifically sound decision' when Varey writes that Shell's analysis 'dealt only with whether the environmental measure was worth pursuing and deciding this on cost in a cost–benefit analysis'. In other words, cost–benefit analysis can only be done from the perspective of who bears the costs and reaps the benefits. Environmental damage to the northwest Atlantic was not borne by Shell while benefits of an environmentally sound disposal did not accrue to them whereas it had to bear the costs.

Thus perhaps the publics' active and oppositional reading of Shell's actions is not simply misunderstanding and ignorance of Shell, nor simply to be dismissed as just so much 'noise' preventing Shell from being heard.

think about 12.6   Shell's publics

How do Varey and Shell view Shell's publics?

- ■ Are these publics seen to be active or passive?
- ■ Are they seen to be intelligent, capable of rational, scientific reasoning?
- ■ Are they seen as easily influenced and manipulated by emotions?
- ■ Can they be rational and, at the same time, guided by their emotions?
- ■ Do these publics hold preferred, negotiated or oppositional readings of Shell on the environment?
- ■ Have these publics got the power and interest to affect Shell's fortunes?
- ■ How do Varey and Shell evaluate the competency of these publics to judge Shell?

PICTURE 12.2 Defacement of a poster – an example of activism. (*Source:* Impact Photos.)

people are disciplined through everyday discourses and practices that they perform voluntarily and take for granted as obvious and natural. Governmental discipline produces docile and passive publics.

She considers three historical conditions as the basis for a typology of publics:

1 *resource dependency*, the extent to which a public depends on others for resources such as funds, information, training, education, the media and publicity
2 *discursive connectivity*, the extent to which one public shares in the discourse, ideas, concepts, language and assumptions of others and hence the potential for negotiation and competition with these others
3 *legitimacy*, the extent to which each public has the right to speak and act within its given role in the community.

She applies these conditions to publics in the HIV/AIDS issue in Thailand to derive a typology of four publics: circumscribed, co-opted, critical, and circumventing publics. However, she states different cultural and historical conditions will yield different historical criteria for categorising publics.

A *circumscribed public* is highly dependent on others for resources. They find it difficult to enter into mainstream discourses. Their legitimacy to speak or act is limited by how others see their roles. Thai Buddhist monks involved in AIDS hospice work are a circumscribed public. They depend on the community and the state for their livelihood, and hence are pressured to conform to these interests. Hospice monks may be circumscribed because they lack funds to finance AIDS-related projects and have little access to the media. Their lack of education and training in science and counselling and the framing of their spiritual training and knowledge as parochial is

used by the state, the medical profession and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in competition with the hospice monks, to justify their circumscription. Some community groups also maintain that monks should not be involved with AIDS as sexual conduct should be taboo to monks. Thus the limited legitimacy of the hospice monks to speak and act freely in the discourses of modern medicine and sexuality is related to how others see their role as monks.

A circumscribed public may remain so, or become a co-opted, critical or circumventing public if conditions are appropriate, e.g. a redistribution of resources and the cooperation of others.

A *co-opted public* behaves within limits prescribed by powerful others and hence has access to resources. They accept the legitimacy of the status quo and are not considered subversive or dangerous. Governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations and community groups may be examples of co-opted publics. Monks may be co-opted in confining themselves to teaching Buddhist meditation. They are awarded funds by the government, whereas monks who do hospice work are denied funding.

NGOs may be co-opted to agree with the circumscription of the monks from the medical sphere as they are competing with hospice monks for funds or legitimacy from medical quarters for their own projects. The need to secure state funding and legitimacy may compel NGOs to circumscribe less favoured publics. The legitimacy of co-opted groups is seldom disputed because they help to reproduce dominant discourses and practices. For example, the Thai government appealed to NGOs for endorsement to improve Thailand's international image in tourism.

A *critical public* is dissatisfied with the status quo. They may include medical staff, NGOs, AIDS patients opting for indigenous herbal treatments instead of modern medicine, communities who blame the government's tourism-orientated development policies for the thriving sex industry and monks resisting the roles set for them by the state and society. Critical publics face constraints such as dependency or competition with others for funding. Many critical publics rely on government or foreign funding.

There are many points of contention between critical publics and the state. They contend that state strategies on HIV/AIDS are misguided and budgets are poorly managed. Community activists have criticised the government's industrialisation and tourism policies. The confluence of rural migration, consumerism, the sex industry and tourism has aggravated the spread of AIDS to rural villages.

Legitimacy varies for each critical public. NGOs, community groups and AIDS patients have more legitimacy in their AIDS work than do the monks in

Consider a recent public relations campaign that you have come across, organised or been the target of.

Would resource dependency, discursive connectivity and legitimacy be useful criteria on which to classify the publics in this campaign? What other factors might be useful criteria?

Would circumscription, co-option, critique and circumvention be a useful typology of these publics? What other types of public might be useful to map the campaign?

Feedback   Would such a different conception and classification of publics lead to a different kind of public relations? How so?

hospice care. Critical publics compete not only for a redistribution of resources but also for the expansion of their discourse and seek to establish their legitimacy. Co-option into state domination is one response to circumscription, the resistance of critical publics is another.

A *circumventing public* follows a critical public in resistance to governmentality. The docile citizen sacrifices their desired sexuality to the discipline of the norms and conventions of being a healthy citizen. A circumventing public resists this discipline by consciously or unconsciously engaging in behaviours considered deviant. However, their engagement behav-

iour is the result of material constraints such as economic poverty (e.g. prostitution to provide for the family).

Circumventing publics may include commercial sex workers, intravenous drug users and homosexuals. They seek out public resources only when absolutely necessary. Some AIDS patients prefer to use indigenous medicine rather than use state hospitals where disclosure of AIDS status is necessary. Others prefer to suffer in silence. Because of their high resource dependency, circumventing publics possess little legitimacy to speak for themselves. (See Think about 12.7.)

Summary

In this chapter we have considered ideas of the passive and active audience and the nature of this passivity and activity. We then considered stakeholder theory, stakeholder mapping and Grunig and Hunt's situational theory of publics. We considered how these concepts are understood in practice by examining two cases.

We concluded by looking at how a different typology of publics may be useful for a different kind of public relations that considers the interests of the publics that are the subjects of public relations campaigns.

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