

**Critical Public Relations, Public Relations Literacy and Activism:
Extending the Scope of Critical Public Relations Scholarship and Practice through
Marxism**

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Abstract

In this article, we present and discuss critical approaches to public relations (PR) scholarship and practice. Theoretical problems associated with PR are due to the fact that the assumption about a passive public in the times of emergence of PR field is no longer applicable and that the notion of public is not really formulated in a comprehensive way. In practice, PR is usually associated with cheating, lies and scandals. A way to cope with unethical PR activities is proposed to be the notion of PR literacy. In this context, we also focus on the link between PR activities and activism. Finally, as a completely understudied topic, we propose and argue for a Marxist public relations, meaning a pro-labor public relations approach. Far from developing this new model in our limited space, we conclude with a call for other interested researchers to develop the preliminary idea proposed in this article.

Keywords: Critical public relations, public relations literacy, feminist public relations, public relations and activism, Marxist public relations, and pro-labor public relations.

Eleştirel Halkla İlişkiler, Halkla İlişkiler Okuryazarlığı ve Eylemcilik:

**Eleştirel Halkla İlişkiler Araştırmalarının ve Uygulamalarının Kapsamını Marksizmle
Genişletmek**

Özet

Bu makalede, halkla ilişkiler araştırmalarına ve uygulamalarına yönelik eleştirel yaklaşımlar sunuluyor ve tartışılıyor. Halkla ilişkilerle ilişkilendirilen kuramsal sorunlar, halkla ilişkilerin ortaya çıktığı zamanlardaki edilgen kamuoyu varsayımının artık geçerli olmamasından ve kamuoyu düşüncesinin kapsamlı bir biçimde formülleştirilmemiş olmasından ileri geliyor. Halkla ilişkiler, uygulamada kandırmaca, yalanlar ve skandallarla ilişkilendiriliyor. Etik olmayan halkla ilişkilerle başa çıkmanın bir yolunun halkla ilişkiler okuryazarlığı olduğu ileri sürülüyor. Bu bağlamda halkla ilişkiler etkinlikleriyle eylemcilik arasındaki ilişkiye de odaklanıyoruz. Son olarak, tümüyle az çalışılmış bir konu olarak, bir emek yanlısı halkla ilişkiler yaklaşımı olarak marksist bir halkla ilişkiler öneriyoruz ve bunu tartışmaya açıyoruz. Kısıtlı sözcük sınırı içerisinde bu yeni modeli geliştirmek yerine, bu makaledeki eskiz halindeki düşünceyi geliştirmeleri için ilgili araştırmacılara yönelik olarak bir çağrıyla makaleyi noktalıyoruz.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Eleştirel halkla ilişkiler, halkla ilişkiler okuryazarlığı, feminist halkla ilişkiler, halkla ilişkiler ve eylemcilik, marksist halkla ilişkiler ve emek yanlısı halkla ilişkiler.

Introduction

Historically speaking, in mainstream public relations theory, public was expected to be passive, so theorization of public was mostly negligent of a resisting public. Thus, most of the PR theories are theories of how corporations or governments do and should interact with the public (mostly meant to be consumers), without a theory of the public itself. Furthermore, just like some other fields such as management or psychology, the relevant journals are inundated with mainstream articles which ignore the function that public relations activities serve in a company or under capitalism at large; and socio-cultural and economic factors constituting the context in which public relations operate. This ignorance in research is coupled with the sense of untrustworthiness of public relations in practice. Roper (2005) rightly argues that “[w]ith growing cynicism within civil society, persuasive arguments from those in power, particularly economic power, are often met with mistrust” (p.78). Fawkes (2012) discusses perceived loss of trust or untrustworthiness of public relations profession from an ethical perspective. While also reminding us that a similar case is applicable for business people, accountants etc., PR’s mistrust problem is more visible.

The disconnect between research and practice in public relations field is another serious problem. J.E. Grunig (2009) argues that practitioners’ connections with relevant research are tenuous. Daymon & Surma (2009) also agree that theory and practice of PR is mostly unconnected, but from the other direction. For Daymon & Surma (2009), it is the practice that is missing in theoretical discussions.

This disconnect is exacerbated by conceptual confusions and misunderstandings. J.E. Grunig (2009) elaborately discusses different interpretations of concepts and conceptualizations accordingly, in public relations research:

“The concept of image provides a good example of confusion over units of analysis. Practitioners often say that their organization has an image—therefore, defining the term as a property of an organization. Others talk about projecting, creating, polishing, or restoring images. Essentially, they are talking about communicating positive messages about their organization—the unit of analysis is the message. Others talk about images as residing in the minds of their publics—an individual, psychological unit of analysis. Still

others define image as what the media say about an organization—so that a content analysis of media stories defines image operationally. Still others lump all these units of analysis together and define image as the “sum total” or “composite” of all of them—a certain problem of adding apples and oranges” (p.94).

A major source of the sense of untrustworthiness of public relations activities is the following: Often PR agencies are asked to and even forced to reflect the company in a positive light. E.g. Berger (2005) reflecting on another work states that

“[t]he company wanted the agency to produce a study demonstrating that consumers were more interested in economic growth than in environmental protection. The agency did the research and found that consumers did want economic growth but not at the cost of environmental protection. The company was furious when the report reflected these findings. As a result, the agency scurried to produce a series of increasingly blander reports until one less-than-accurate but acceptable report was crafted” (p.12-13).

In order to cope with deliberate deception efforts in many of the public relations campaigns, Holladay & Coombs (2013) propose the notion of public relations literacy as a subset of media literacy to cover not only corporate messages, but all sorts of messages by other institutions, social movements, groups and individuals that have an intention of persuasion.

Public Relations Literacy

According to Holladay & Coombs (2013),

“(…) public relations literacy requires the ability to distinguish between messages created by for-profit and non-profit organizations and to identify the particular ideological and value commitments guiding the public relations efforts. Furthermore, it requires the ability to discern ‘who wins’ and ‘who loses’ in society as well as the marketplace if particular values are embraced” (p.129).

“[m]edia literacy involves recognizing that media messages are constructions (rather than reflections of reality) and understanding who does the constructing and for what purposes. This necessitates consideration of the creators of the messages and their motivations, values, and decision-making about contents and forms of messages. When considering public relations literacy, we should encourage people to identify the sources behind the messages and consider how and why those sources benefit by strategically framing specific messages in particular ways” (p.128).

As stated above, the notion of public relations literacy is used in its widest sense: “(...) public relations messages are not limited to those messages produced by the ‘PR industry’ but also include those messages produced by social movements, organizations, and individuals seeking to persuade others through all forms of media as well as in interpersonal and public contexts” (Holladay & Coombs, 2013, p.126).

Although this makes sense at first blush, such an open-ended definition has implications further than the initial intention. For one thing, if we move our focus from corporations and governments to smaller actors of the field, it is highly likely that we would come across non-media versions of communication and persuasion such as direct personal relationships. For instance, political parties want to build personal relations with each voter in a particular neighborhood and knock the doors one by one. They directly talk to each individual without a media or with media such as stickers, brochures, postcards, branded merchandize etc. Non-media case of persuasion is also covered by the public relations literacy definition. A second case could be the one where a friend tries to convince that a particular brand of smart phone is the best among others despite of its high price. That may not look like a case of persuasion. But if later on you hear that he gets some gifts for convincing a friend to buy the same brand of phone, it also becomes an issue of public relations literacy. But this is again a non-media case of persuasion. It is direct. The message is transmitted without a human-made media channel. That means public relations literacy can't be conceptualized as a subset of media literacy. Some of its aspects match non-media communication.

Secondly, the notion of consumer is problematic in this conceptualization of public relations literacy. Holladay & Coombs (2013) state that “[w]e are using the term ‘consumer’ in a generic sense to be any person who encounters and attends to a public relations message” (p.126). This is a narrow and untenable understanding of consumers for two reasons: Public relations activities do not only convince the people to buy their products, but form opinions and positive attitudes about the sectors the corporations are involved in such as genetically modified organisms (see Motion & Weaver, 2005) and impression management after corporate crises such as scandals. Secondly, governmental public relations activities are as important as the corporate ones and they are aiming for even a wider scope of targets such as manipulating voting behavior, raise or destroy prestige of a party, a policy, a personality etc. Thus consumer/citizens or citizens

alone would be better to characterize corporate and governmental PRs. These terms also characterize other forms of PR (i.e. PR by other sources such as NGOs and non-media PR such as interpersonal persuasion activities) to some extent. In upcoming pages, Holladay & Coombs (2013) use the term ‘critical consumer’ (p.132). A better term would be ‘critical citizen’, and the notion of critical citizenship can be more comprehensive compared to public relations literacy.

A third and more fundamental problem of the notion of public relations literacy is due to the literacy analogy itself. Originally, the notion of literacy in the context of ability to read and write does not involve any discussion, dialogue, criticism or any subjectivity. Regardless of one’s political, social, philosophical thoughts one can be literate or illiterate. However, when we apply this idea to media or public relations we come up with not a single approach, but multiples. For example, while we talk about public relations literacy here, companies can say that it is wrong, as persuasion is inherent in marketing without which capitalism can’t survive. Without marketing, the companies can’t find their customers. So they will find public relations literacy toxic, counter-productive and anti-capitalist. Nevertheless, after noting these three problems, we still think that public relations literacy can be useful and meaningful for critical public relations scholarship and practice. On the other hand, advertising literacy and marketing literacy will be the partially overlapping neighbors of public relations literacy which shows a disorganized way of discussing the concepts.

In that sense, for questioning mainstream public relations activities, the following questions are highly useful:

“What might the source gain through acceptance of its construction of reality? Are there alternative constructions of reality that could challenge this one? How would recommended responses benefit the source? How would particular individuals and/or society benefit from, and perhaps be disadvantaged by the recommended responses?” (Holladay & Coombs, 2013, p.129)

Nevertheless, literacy is a limited term by itself. We need a more comprehensive term to cover many other contentious issues in mainstream public relations scholarship and practice. Thus emerged the notion of critical public relations. According to Berger (2005), “any public relations theory is deficient to the extent it fails to account for power relations and structures in organizations” (p.23).

3. Critical Public Relations

As a background to critical public relations scholarship and practice, “[t]here is general agreement among these scholars [i.e. critical PR scholars] that public relations needs to engage with a wider range of theory to develop a greater understanding of its role in society” (Fawkes, 2012, p.124). Public relations is not only a communication activity, it has social, political and economic contexts and implications (Motion & Weaver, 2005). According to Tyma (2008),

“[t]he driving focus of critical theory and those that practice it is to understand and change the same social institutions (whether they are grounded in business and commerce, government, entertainment, or education, etc.) that oppress one group of people or class in favor of another. The correlation between the ethical goals of public relations and critical theory are evident” (p.196).

Likewise, Motion & Weaver (2005) state that

“The task for the critical public relations scholar is to investigate how public relations practice uses particular discursive strategies to advance the hegemonic power of particular groups and to examine how these groups attempt to gain public consent to pursue their organizational mission” (p.50).

In a short critical article, Weaver (2001) concludes that

“If public relations theory adopts a commitment to examining how public relations practice is implicated in relations of power, it will be able to articulate its project as being of equal relevance to the disempowered as it is to those already empowered in, and by, the new economy. This reorientation of public relations theory requires that theorists analyze and articulate their own subjective identities and relationships to notions of profit, efficiency, and progress in the new economy. By following this approach, public relations theorists will be equipped to evaluate their own complicity in the production of culture, whether in support of corporate capitalists, or alternative subjectivities” (p.286).

Motion & Weaver (2005) provide a handy case study about how critical public relations tools and concepts can be used to analyze a particular PR campaign to convince the public about harmlessness and usefulness of genetically modified organisms in New Zealand. From a more or less similar critical view, Henderson (2005) conducts research on the same issue, focusing on the activists’ positions and identity considerations.

Critical public relations also includes its own criticism. Otherwise, sooner or later it will be frozen as dogma. Tyma (2008) in that context argues that

“[u]nfortunately, (...) although critical and postmodern approaches to public relations do an excellent job of identifying and articulating the socio-cultural concerns within and surrounding the public relations profession, these same critiques fall short of providing solutions toward these concerns for those same practitioners. In response to the above-stated positions, (...) public relations practitioners should use critically theoretical approaches to construct and engage current, not simply critique previous, public relations practices” (p.14)

We see that some other researchers also harbor similar views: While Fawkes (2012) acknowledges the fact that “[c]ritical writers scrutinize the power dynamics of organizations and their publics and often reveal persistent involvement of public relations practitioners in propaganda and deception, past and present” (p.122-123), she reasonably criticizes some of the critical PR scholars by the following position: “However, they provide little insight into what might constitute legitimate public relations, and they tend to conflate corporate business interests with communication, without considering the promotional activities of voluntary, charity or trade union groups, for example” (Fawkes, 2012, p.123).

That is why, we need to talk about activism with regard to public relations, as it has the potential to provide us the missing link between critical public relations scholarship and critical public relations practice. It may also provide a clue about what is missing in mainstream research and practice.

Public Relations and Activism

As stated earlier, the notion of public relations had emerged and developed without public pressure. Although class struggles and rights movements were stronger in the first half of the previous century, these protests were rarely directed to public relations activities. In that sense, Sriramesh & Duhé (2009) propose that

“Although young, the body of literature on activism and public relations is growing particularly because of the growth of activism around the world. Even in controlled societies such as China where the political philosophy had for decades ensured that there was no activism, one finds an increase in social activism often caused by unrest due to disparities in wealth in the “new economy.” As a result, the extent to which labor unions, NGOs, and other activist publics are influential in the marketplace creates different challenges and opportunities for public relations—challenges that the current body of literature does not

adequately address. Integrating the political economy perspective to a greater extent into the body of literature will facilitate the process of integrating public relations with activism” (p.374).

Activism examples with regard to public relations abound all over the world, including Australia (Demetrious, 2008; Dimitrov, 2008), New Zealand (Henderson, 2005), South Africa (Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015), Uganda (Natifu & Zikusooka, 2014), United States (Sommerfeldt, 2017) etc., while an increasing number of works focus on public relations of NGOs which is directly relevant for public relations activism (e.g. Ali et al., 2016; Edwards, 2018; Seo, Kim & Yang, 2009; Wakefield, Burnett & Akinaka, 2011).

Author (in press) had identified 4 shades of mainstream public relations practice in addition to greenwashing and whitewashing:

“Yellowwashing for cleaning up corporate injustice against workers, orangewashing for hiding unhealthy and inhumane production processes of goods against consumers, bluewashing for covering up government scandals against citizens, and finally pinkwashing for concealing gender injustice in production or management” (n.p.).

In fact, these four colors have parallels in activism with regard to public relations: We can advocate a pro-labor, pro-health, pro-citizen and pro-feminist or non-sexist or gender-egalitarian public relations in addition to pro-environmental and pro-truth (i.e. as opposed to whitewashing) public relations.

For overall whitewashing, we can discuss corporate lies. Roper (2012) reframes corporate public relations and its public as a conflict between different discourses which can be applicable for PR and activism as well. It also easy to replace ‘discourse’ here with ‘narrative’. Thus, we can state that PR and its public don’t share the same narrative. Kent (2015) applies the notion of master plots to PR narratives to come up with a highly fruitful classification of PR texts. However, for some, these discourse and narrative accounts imply that we are in a post-truth era (see Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook, 2017). In that sense, the corporations are claimed to voice alternative truths in their PR activities rather than lies. However, we don’t agree with this. A corporate lie is just a lie; calling it an ‘alternative truth’ serves the ideological function of legitimating the corporate habit of lying by itself.

Following the idea of the pinkwashing, feminist critical public relations scholarship is uncommon. Fitch, James & Motion (2016) can be noted as an exception which discuss the

possibility of a feminist public relations model on the basis of a descriptive (i.e. the current gender gap in society and PR) and a normative (i.e. an advocacy for changing the gender inequalities) approach. They note that sometimes public opinion perceives PR as a task of women and gays as a result of increasing presence of both in public relations businesses. But in patriarchal societies, such a feminine perception blocks PR experts' participation to the group of the top corporate decision makers also known as the dominant coalition. Feminization leads to perceptions of lower prestige and seriousness (Fitch, James & Motion, 2016). It may also be the other way around: Public relations can be considered as a women's job in companies where PR department is weak or no say in decision making. In corporate representations, usually young, female professionals of PR and related areas are contrasted with old, male strategic decision makers. Strategy is usually considered to be men's area, and women are systematically excluded from senior positions under patriarchy. Thus, the following point makes perfect sense:

“[e]vident in the gendered public relations discourses and in responses to our attempts to explore links between feminism and public relations is a kind of anti-feminism as if the numerical dominance of women in the industry suggests that the battle for equality has been won and public relations offers unique opportunities for the advancement of women” (Fitch, James & Motion, 2016, p.283).

Another point to explore can be the notion of feminine values such as care ethics which is a moot point among researchers (see Koggel & Orme, 2010). From a sociological point of view, we can do research about how Public Relations activities can differentially influence women in contrast to the men, if that is the case. Likewise, we can investigate how increasing female participation to public relations activities as public relations professionals, or as members of the dominant coalition in a company, or as merely citizens influences public relations as a profession. This discussion should also involve LGBTIs in public relations (see Ciszek, 2018; 2017; Rodriguez, 2016).

A Proposal for Critical Scholarship: Towards a Marxist Public Relations

One of the colored PR activities we mentioned above was yellowwashing. But surprisingly enough, there is no matching research, practice or activism area called 'Marxist public relations' nor 'pro-labor public relations'. There is no academic article mentioning these terms. So within the limited space of an article we are allotted, we decided to make a thought experiment and discuss how a Marxist public relations scholarship and practice would look like.

As a starting point, we need to mention that we use the term ‘Marxist’ here interchangeably with ‘pro-labor’. The notion of Marxist public relations requires a marriage between public relations and industrial relations which had been an unlikely marriage until this article. That was unlikely because public relations is considered to be pro-capitalist by Marxists, and industrial relations area is mostly pro-labor. Another reason for neglect is due to the fact that the heydays of public relations with the rise of neo-liberalism coincides with the demise of Marxism due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and most of its allies. However, other than a political system, Marxism is a methodology in sociology and neighboring social sciences. In that sense, it is hard to be socially realistic without a Marxist methodology. Furthermore, one does not need to be a Marxist, to use a Marxist methodology. On the other hand, here we are not defending dogmatic and schematic versions of Marxism, as will be seen in the upcoming paragraphs.

In order to develop this idea, we need to revise the way we call the field. In fact, the term ‘public relations’ is not a term above the social, political, historical and economic conditions of the times of its emergence. When those conditions are no longer applicable, it turns out to be a misnomer. Thus we will offer a more comprehensive and time resistant term to characterize the field: Organizational communication. Why not corporate communication? Because that term does not cover governments, NGOs and social movements. So here we contrast organizational communication with individual-to-individual communication which is a communication of equals (e.g. friends) or quasi-equals (e.g. brothers with different ages; couples in an egalitarian society, but not in a matriarchal or patriarchal society). Organizational communication include any individual-to-organization and organization-to-organization communication as well as intra-organizational communication. Such a definition will include families, schools, media, corporations, governments, NGOs, social movement etc., in other words, anything socially organized rather than corporations and governments only. So we will bring a power interpretation for Marxism where rather than class differences in narrow terms, we will talk about the conflict between oppressors and oppresseds. We will define the ‘oppressor’ as an organized force which has the potential (not necessarily actual) power to unwillfully force people to do something for their own organizational interest, while by ‘oppressed’, we mean people who can potentially be forced to do something that they don’t want to do, but also who had the potential to resist. Based on these reinterpretations, we can make a bullet list of a Marxist public relations (organizational communication) hopefully to be discussed in future works:

1. Conflict: In Marxist public relations (organizational communication) (MPR/OC) conflict is not something to be avoided, but managed. The conflicts are considered to be inherent to the history as well as capitalism. The interests of a company and an individual (e.g. an employee or a consumer or a citizen) can't be the same. The company will look for profit maximization while the individual will try to protect his/her livelihood (through salary for the case of an employee, through thriftiness for the case of a consumer or through right to information for the case of a citizen).

2. Corporate Lies: MPR/OC does not treat corporate lies or distortions as exceptions, but the norm. The barriers to stop companies to act unethically are in fact limited in scope. The corporate scandals are only a tip of the iceberg.

3. The Potential Oppressors: The potential oppressors are equipped with all sorts of technology to invade oppresseds' lives to force them to do something they don't want or something they are convinced to believe that that is what they want. The system creates artificial needs, and after some time it becomes hard to decide which need is basic or artificial.

4. The Potential Oppresseds: The potential oppresseds mostly harbor false consciousness about organizations. They think that organizations work for public benefit, even in the case of profit maximization. They believe in the saying that "they make money for themselves, but in that way they bring social facilities for the community." If the majority or a strong core of a minority of oppresseds would shed their false consciousness, as a snake does with its skin, and resist, organizational communications will fail.

5. Organizations of the Oppresseds: In order to resist, the oppresseds should organize. When they organize, they also use organizational communication techniques. It is no surprise that Lenin was one of the first to develop the notion of propaganda. In such a case, the organization has some power, but not as strong as the organizations of capitalism. When such an organization overthrows the government, it becomes an oppressor force regardless of its ideology, as here the notion of oppressor is defined in terms of potential power rather than potential actions.

6. Organization-to-Organization: Once oppresseds are organized, they have some power to influence the oppressing organization. For example against a company polluting rivers, the community can get organized and may become a power.

7. Organizational Alienation: The power of the organizations of capitalism has two sources: Physical force (symbolized by security) and consent. Oppresseds are organizationally alienated: The organizations make decisions that directly or indirectly affect them, but they have no say in any decision making processes. They also think that there is no way this situation will change. They are inherently fatalistic.

The list can be extended, but due to our limited space, we stop here.

Conclusion

In this article, we started our reflection on public relations field by shortly presenting the theoretical weaknesses and practical difficulties of public relations both as a research area and a profession. Observing the widespread occurrence of unethical public relations practices, we discussed the notion of public relations literacy. However, as this notion has its own limitations, we decided to move forward with the notion of critical public relations scholarship and practice. This was followed by a brief portrayal of activism related to public relations. Finally, we tried to capitalize on Marxism to develop a pro-labor or Marxist public relations model. We are in no way claiming that it is a full-fledged model. We hope that other researchers with similar academic interests would work on the ideas developed here to come up with better ones.

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