Critical public relations: Some reflections
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Abstract
This article offers some brief reflections on the emergence and development of critical work in the field of public relations. Thoughts expressed are necessarily subjective and set within the context of teaching and researching in Scotland at the margins of the United Kingdom. The focus is on the relationship between the researcher and the discipline and consideration is given to definitions of critical work in public relations and the challenges that face those working within this paradigm both in research and teaching.

Keywords: Critical theory; Paradigm; Sociology of public relations; Class; Profession; Power; Grounded theory; Reflexivity; Public relations education

1. Defining critical work

Methodologically critical work derives in the continental European context from the German tradition of quellekritik—discursive, argumentative, hermeneutic work. Definitions of “critical” work go beyond the common everyday use of the term, which implies negative evaluation as Morrow and Brown (1994) point out, and include:

- work that challenges current assumptions in the field;
- work that alters boundaries and produces a “paradigm shift” (Kuhn, 1970);
- work that critiques policy or practice in the field;
- work that specifically draws for its inspiration on the intellectual sociological project known as Critical Theory.

There is some difficulty in defining Critical Theory due to its broad and varied development since its origins in the Frankfurter School in the 1920s and 1930s (led by Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse). Critical Theory emerged from Western Marxism (Held, 1990) but its concerns are broad (epistemology, methodology, ethics) aiming to elucidate transformative processes in society. Critical Theory is thus not a single theory but an interdisciplinary approach which seeks to define assumptions which are taken-for-granted with a view to challenging their source and legitimacy. It aims to transform those social, political and economic structures which limit human potential. It seeks to identify,
challenge, and debate the strategies of domination that are implicit in such structures. Such investigation and debate have the potential to raise awareness and act as a catalyst for change. There is thus an implicit political motivation behind Critical Theory and the research that it inspires.

Critical Theory has developed as a strongly methodological project concerned not only with social transformations but the categories deployed to understand and articulate change (Morrow & Brown, 1994). In particular, it emphasizes that facts can never be isolated from values and that “all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted” (Kincheloe & McClaren, 1994, p. 139). This approach has influenced social science disciplines, such as anthropology, history, communications and cultural studies education, social work, management and organizational studies, and public administration (Morrow & Brown, 1994). Thus, Critical Theory tries to go beyond traditional empirical research routines in understanding and revealing the assumptions of research and the forces that shape them. Critical Theory encourages us to be self-aware and transparent in the way we think, write and teach.

2. Critical work in public relations: what it is and why it matters

Critical work in public relations has blossomed in the last decade. It has challenged current assumptions, defined and critiqued a “dominant paradigm” (and thus in the process defined itself and marked new boundaries), applied critical theory (especially those who have been influenced by media sociology) and critiqued policy and practice. A community of critically inclined scholars has begun to emerge, though as yet it does not have a critical mass to have developed its own conferences or journal. But undeniably it has made an impact on the field as is evidenced by a number of the contributions to the Handbook of Public Relations (Heath, 2001), which in itself can be seen as a major turning point for the public relations discipline. Key contributions to the Handbook from established scholars acknowledged, if occasionally unhappily (Grunig, 2001), the existence of critical work while others commented in more detail on the emerging scene or introduced new ideas to the field, pushing the boundaries yet further (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Heath, 2001; Leeper, 2001; Leitch & Neilson, 2001; McKie, 2001).

Since then, there has been a major discursive turn within the field (Mickey, 2003; Surma, 2005; Weaver, Motion, & Roper, 2005); a re-orientation away from the U.S. towards other cultures and histories (L’Etang, 2004; Sriramesh and Verčić, 2003; Tilsom & Alorie, 2004); and a merging with media sociology (Moloney, 2000). There has also been some published research from media sociologists of various critical (in both senses) persuasions (Davis, 2002; McNair, 1996; Miller & Dinan, 2000).

Careful work on theoretical frameworks—Pieczka’s (1996) forensic essay critiquing systems theory remains a classic—and key concepts, such as Leitch and Neilson’s (1997) deconstruction of “public,” and some polemical pieces, such as McKie (1997, 2001)—have begun to provide a richer field. Berger’s (2005) recent insights into public relations at the managerial level explode the concept of “dominant coalition,” to reveal the chaotic, partial and political world of management practice. Similar findings in management research have led to discursive, symbolic and critical debates in that field and the founding of the European Group of Organisational Studies (EGOS), which focuses on critical reflection and new knowledge in organizational studies (www.egosnet.org/), and the Standing Conference of Organisational Symbolism (SCOS). The SCOS, the symbol of which is the dragon (representing unknown forces within the organization), was established as “serious fun” more than 20 years ago to explore unusual and groundbreaking ideas in organizational analysis, “to provoke discussion on the marginalised perspectives on the understanding of organisational life” and to “provide an arena where the boundaries of conventional thinking about organized life can be challenged and blurred” (www.scos.org/). Perhaps we need some ‘serious fun’ in public relations too!

Berger’s (2005) rigorous qualitative approach shows that managerial life is not rational, logical and predictable but messy, emotional, political and fragmented. Of particular interest is his analysis of resistance in which the public relations practitioner aligns him/herself with alternative organizational cultures (sub or micro) to subvert the dominant or official culture prescribed by management. This work also links to Morgan’s (1986, 1993) research, which uses metaphor to demonstrate how there are always multiple perspectives at any point in time within an organization, a feature which has not so far been dealt with in public relations writing on internal communications—employees are too often treated as a single public. At a societal level, Berger (2005) alerts us to the “essential dissonance in the practice itself” (p. 23) by asking:
Whom do practitioners serve? Their own career interests? The organization? The profession? The interests of others in the margins? The larger society? Moreover, who is defining that service (Rakow, 1989)? Is it the practitioner? The professional association? The CEO or other top manager? A journalist or community official outside the organization? (p. 23)

These questions point us towards the need for multiple perspectives and critical case studies, such as those by Motion and Weaver (2005) or Durham (2005) within whose work lies the major problematic of globalization. One of the key features of Berger’s (2005) work is that he, like so many of the classic management writers (such as Chester Barnard and Max Weber), addresses the political aspect of the organization. Interestingly, he uses the terms “power over” and “power with” which I believe are terms which may have been first introduced by the unsung management heroine Mary Parker Follett (1868–1933) who, in the 1930s, anticipated many of the ideas used in public relations theory including communication co-orientation and conflict resolution.

The efforts to date have helped us towards a much broader understanding of public relations as a practice that has evolved to the status of a semi-profession, which plays a major role in contemporary society and which has benefited from, as well as contributing to, the processes of globalization. Yet recent work still highlights tensions in the field as well as opening up avenues for future exploration. It is interesting that Motion and Weaver (2005) begin their recent article in Journal of Public Relations Research by re-articulating functionalist concerns that critical public relations should “more clearly outline how their approaches contribute to advancing not only public relations theory, but also research and practice (p. 49). Is it not enough that critical public relations improves understanding through more open approaches that are not driven by other agendas, such as professionalization? In my view, critical public relations academics should not feel the need to justify their work in this way or to make formulaic acknowledgement of functional academics. If critical scholars feel this is necessary then that raises worrying questions about power in the public relations academy.

It is perfectly clear from Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones’s (2003) review of public relations journals that public relations research reflects a dominant paradigm, which is so much taken-for-granted that researchers claim that “no dominant paradigms per se have emerged” (Sallot et al., 2003, p. 51). Yet, as this special issue of Public Relations Review clearly shows, there are many scholars who are situated in the margins—geographically, ideologically and methodologically.

The geographical core of much PR research still lies in the U.S. As Sallot et al.’s (2003) review clearly shows, it is the U.S. experience of public relations that is regarded as universal. To take just a couple of examples: The authors code “Women and Minorities,” rather than specifying “U.S. Women and Minorities,” although the articles entirely reflect the U.S. experience and U.S. notions of political correctness. One cannot help but wonder why, if men are in a minority in U.S. PR, they do not get a look-in and why their experiences and perspectives have not been researched? Likewise, Sallot et al. (2003) code “The History of PR,” which includes articles about U.S. history, whereas histories from the rest of the world are lumped together with a range of articles on other subjects, such as inter and cross-cultural communication, and role and scope studies in a range of nations. The authors display no sign of reflexivity, fair play, or even-handedness, and the quantitative approach contributes to the problem. Their article focuses on “theory development” but, naturally, emphasizes traditional positivist approaches since these have dominated the field to date. One wonders when grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) will begin to make an impact in public relations?

3. The path ahead

There is still more that can be done in public relations in terms of engaging with media sociological critiques, expanding analysis of organizational cultures to encompass the postmodern, symbolic and critical work in management studies, and exploring the notion of public relations and culture. There remains a major gap in terms of anthropological approaches to the practice and the utilization of ethnographic methodology. There also remains the challenge of trying to publish empirical qualitative work which tends to occupy a much longer space than is acceptable to most journals.

One particular gap in the sociology of public relations relates to that of class. Research from this perspective could explore how public relations serves some classes more than others and in what ways. The role of public relations in promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) suggests that class plays an important role in the concept and role described by
Bourdieu (1986) as “distinction”. More introspectively, class could be utilized as an organizing tool to explore
the composition of public relations practice and the backgrounds of practitioners in determining the structure and role
of the occupation in various societies and links it may have to “international business class”.

Reflecting again on critical public relations, there is the sense of addressing the question: what is all this effort for?
The majority of those publishing in the field do teach on public relations courses. Degrees operate in a market and
to be marketable, courses have to be functional. How should critical public relations be handled within the crowded
timetable? The danger of separate modules in critical perspectives, ethical issues in public relations, corporate social
responsibility or those, which address political communication and propaganda is that students compartmentalize their
critical thinking into that timetable slot. The use of case study material can overcome this to some extent although it
can sometimes compromise in-depth theoretical discussion.

A related, but unexplored, problem is in the potential tension that may be experienced by the critically focused
public relations academic who is still likely to spend a substantial part of the curriculum teaching functional material.
Is the Jekyll and Hyde transformation from teacher to critic exciting and stimulating, distressing or pathological? This
dichotomy raises pedagogical issues, such as the extent to which lecturers are transparent in showing where their own
belief systems might affect their interpretation and teaching and being explicit about which role they are adopting
during teaching. There may also be issues in relation to lecturer–student relations in the sense that students doubt the
value of minority perspectives in the field. This, however, is not to say that one should be apologetic in teaching abstract
approaches. Instead, lecturers can focus on the liberationary aspects of critical theory and use these to encourage more
intellectual creativity in students. It may also be necessary to introduce students to the notion of academic politics
and paradigms of PR, which does of course have the use of demonstrating how any area of work is more complex
and confictual than appears to be the case. Students, just like public relations practitioners, need to learn to cope with
ambiguity and to understand sense-making processes.

Leichty’s (2005) original discussion on “The Cultural Tribes of Public Relations” was inspired by anthropol-
yogy and enlightened by qualitative data and raises sets of assumptions we may draw upon in thinking about public
relations. This is useful work because it encourages us to be reflexive and to recognize paradigms. With this in
mind we might also want to reflect further on the processes of paradigm alignment in relation to academics’ career
progression. What are the costs and benefits in stepping outside the dominant paradigm? Over time individuals
develop their ideas but have there been any Pauline conversions or surrenderings to the politics of the academic
domain?

To sum up: it is my position that critical public relations should not necessarily feel accountable to applied scholars
or to the practice to justify their work. As intellectuals in the field critical scholars should feel free to push back the
boundaries of knowledge, explore and define the boundaries of the field, engage with methodological debates,
engage with contemporary intellectual thought more broadly with a view to considering the implications for public
relations, and to communicate their ideas through research journals, conferences, lectures, seminars, public media,
and informal settings in order to educate publics more broadly about the practice and its role in organizations and
society.

One danger that critically focused academics do have to be aware of, is that of egocentric thinking which might lead
to intellectual arrogance, closed-mindedness, unfairness (to those who hold other views) or of intellectual conformity
to a new set of conventions (Paul & Elder, 2004). Now that I reflect back on the last 15 years, I can see that due
to my intellectual background in history, philosophy, and social science, I was puzzled at the unidimensional nature
of the public relations discipline, frustrated by some of what I saw as over-idealistic frameworks and judgements,
especially in relation to ethics and propaganda, bored by some of the functionality, motivated by some annoyance at
feedback, which suggested one should just “fit in” and do work that was usable in practice and contributed to its social
acceptability.

I had had experience of public relations at The British Council and the London School of Economics and my
motivation on entering academia was, fundamentally, to understand better the nature of public relations as a social
practice. Now, tempered by the experience I can also see other dangers of being caught like the fly in amber in endless
paradigm debates and want to escape again—to explore public relations practice in many different domains in health
and science, in sport, in tourism, in order to understand even better this curious occupation and its relationship to our
culture. Necessarily, this will take me towards a more empirical approach though I hope to retain my critical edge.
Whatever, the outcome, I am hoping for excitement—and to continue to learn from colleagues and scholars who take
different approaches.


