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Towards organisational activism in the UAE: A case study approach.



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1. Introduction

In recent years, organisations have become aware that committing to social good can only improve their reputations and consequently help them achieve their goals (Sommerfeldt, 2013; Sage, 2012). Organisations have increasingly committed to socially beneficial projects through corporate social responsibility programmes, proving that PR has the power to set agendas and cause behavioural change. For example, PR has gained social relevance and embraced the age of the social collective (Fournier and Avery, 2011). The Internet and social media have enabled an open environment in which both audiences and organisations exert influence and power.

The majority of studies in PR address power as an internal force and a source of contention (Edwards, 2006); this paper looks at power as an external force that is impactful on the community. It attempts to understand the extent to which public relations could be a force in monarchical environments and advocate on behalf of minority groups to support their interests. Drawing on seminal public relations campaigns, this research uses a case study approach to discuss corporate PR activism in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

2. Literature review

Prevalent PR literature covers functions and management within the four models of PR (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Public relations activities bring attention to the brand (Moloney, 2006), contribute to achieving the organisation's goals and sustain its relationships with its audiences (Melbourne, 2012). In the normative view, public relations' general aim is to influence opinion and behavior. The power of public relations is often manifested in its ability to influence publics through persuasive communications. In this way, practitioners

'utilize communication to create power. (...) When publics accept the practitioner's view of the world, hegemony is created and publics cede power to the organizations. Organizations can use power to dominate publics and much of the critical public relations research seeks to illuminate this hegemonic domination' (Coombs and Holladay, 2012, p. 881).

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Scholars have condemned this functionalist and behaviorist perspective, while adopting different approaches (see [Ihlen and Verhoeven, 2015](#) for a list of approaches). One of the alternatives to this normative model is found in the post-modernist approach to PR, which views it as able to 'engender both power and resistance' ([Edwards, 2012, p. 19](#)). This approach raises both an activist role for practitioners who make use of their conscience 'rather than the conscience of the organisation' ([Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002, p. 66](#)) as well as ethics for societal wellbeing ([Macnamara, 2014](#)). Examining how practitioners can become change agents, Holtzhausen and Voto argue that,

[T]he postmodern practitioner also can assist the organization itself to become activist by resisting dominant and harmful power in society in general. Organizations that take on government policies that harm the environment or take a stand on behalf of marginalized social groups will be a typical example of such activism' (2002, p. 63).

Recent studies ([Edwards, 2012](#); [L'Etang, Mckie, Snow, & Xifra, 2014](#); [L'Etang, 2009](#)) that have focused on critical thinking about PR and postmodernist approaches to PR have called for PR research outside the mainstream that reconceptualises PR and relocates it in 'a sociological and cultural context' ([Macnamara, 2014, p. 72](#)). The work of [Edwards and Hodges \(2011\)](#) is case in point of the cultural approach to PR. Examples of the social approach to PR can be found in [Ihlen, Van Ruler, & Fredriksson \(2009\)](#) as well as [Ihlen and Verhoeven's \(2015\)](#). [Holtzhausen \(2012, p. 365\)](#) speaks in favour of an additional approach, social activism arguing that PR practitioners should focus more on 'conflict and resistance'. Building on previous works, essentially Latin American, that promote empowerment to 'serve genuine concerns of citizens', [Hodges and McGrath \(2011, p. 91\)](#) call for an approach that involves dialogue and participation between and among communities and PR practitioners. They argue that communities enact social transformation when they are involved in the co-creation of the meaning of messages and when they consider truthful the purpose of the communication programmes.

This paper draws on this last approach and takes a postmodernist perspective to discuss the extra-organisational activism of public relations. While intra-organisational activism addresses activism within the organisation and for its interests ([Berger, 2005](#)), extra-organisational activism is motivated by societal interests ([Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002](#)). Extra-organisational activism involves a network of intermediaries ([Hodges & McGrath, 2011](#)), including PR practitioners who brush aside their interests and keep low their profiles moving away from the 'mutually-beneficial' core of PR. New media proved effectiveness in connecting this network of intermediaries while strengthening and broadening the relationships with the publics. [Men and Tsai \(2015\)](#) argue that social media are a milieu that enables interpersonal communication with organisations. Social media influence the relationships between organisations and their publics ([Men & Tsai, 2016](#)); they are additional ingredients to achieve social power ([Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2015](#)).

Building upon the social and cultural perspectives that revisit the fundamentals and epistemology of PR, and through case studies, this research sheds light on some ways when PR practices enable social change. Through the examination of award-winning campaigns in marketing communication festivals and competitions, I argue that PR can enact a conscience to drive social change and improve human relations.

Regrettably, it has become quite common for corporations to take advantage of the weak and fragile situations of employees ([Human Rights Watch, 2015](#)). In those cases, state governments have the duty and responsibility to protect those employees as well as all members of their society. However, in many cases, they do not. Failure to protect human rights has previously led to rebellion, protests and revolts. Public activism may lead to the protection of workers' rights, but when this does not or cannot occur, other instances may emerge that speak to those workers' rights and enact civil society through public relations ([Taylor, 2010](#)). In these cases, organisations act as social actors that connect people, organisations and networks for better social cohesion. This is particularly true in non-democratic societies where freedom of expression is challenged by regulation and censorship.

This study belongs to a body of research that uses an international perspective of public relations. Situated in a non-Western context, the cases in this text describe an industry that is still developing. As context is an integral part of these cases, the discussion starts with geographic and socio-political context and ends with remarks on the socio-resistant flavour of these campaigns.

3. Socio-political and geographic context

Situated in the Arabian Gulf, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a monarchy of seven emirates with some degree of autonomy ([Commins, 2012](#)). Like the other monarchies in the Arabian Gulf (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain), the UAE gained its wealth from its natural resources, mainly oil and gas. In 1971, the UAE adopted its programme of labour immigration (the *kafala* sponsorship system) to respond to its construction and infrastructure needs as well as to support its economic development. The UAE's very small population combined with a lack of knowledge and education led the country to attract and rely on both white- and blue-collar immigrant workers, the majority of whom are Asian labourers working in construction. According to the UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation, of the population of 4.5 million labour force in 2015, 32.68 percent worked in construction followed by 23.67 percent in trade and repair services; the rest were spread throughout manufacturing and other services ([mohre.gov, 2016](#)). Labourers' living and working conditions have been criticized by global NGOs, humanitarian associations and the media. The concerns regularly include low pay, poor living conditions, few entertainment opportunities, poor safety and working conditions, and difficult transitions between jobs. Until 2015, the regulation and sponsorship conditions prevent the workers from contesting, however the 2015 revised labour law includes provisions for workers on ways to voice out their concerns. Although significant progress has been

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