Divided we stand: Defying hegemony in global public relations theory and practice?

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ABSTRACT

The last decade has seen the world becoming increasingly complex. One way of dealing with complexity, according to Schwab (2010a), is to look for certainties or solutions that impose order by simplifying. The authors contend that this is a risk in public relations practice and the academy. While recognizing their benefits they warn against attempts to produce global models which also seek to impose hegemony and argue for maintaining a diversity that reflects reality. They take the cases of the UK and Singapore as respective exemplars where hegemony has arguably occurred and where it can still be resisted. They call for a professional and epistemological stand against hegemony.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade the world has changed radically. According to Klaus Schwab, Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum (Schwab, 2010a) the five drivers of time compression, complexity, interdependence, interconnectivity of issues and shifts in power from the west to the east and from the north to the south, drive the changes of world society today. The issues they generate have far surpassed governments' or organizations' ability to cope and as a consequence, one response, Schwab contends, has been to reduce complexity by searching for new certainties or solutions that impose order and certainty by simplifying. In practice this means, according to the authors of this paper, accepting and in some cases enforcing convergence: commonalities and standards that cut across time, space and culture, like global accounting standards, legal practices, and behemoth social media platforms. It is, of course, wrong to imply that all global initiatives of this kind are reprehensible. Global accounting standards seek not only to establish the basis for minimum standards, but facilitate international exchange of information that has for legal and governance purposes to be of a universal nature. Enterprises such as the UN Global Compact have sought to establish minimum working standards and human rights in the workplace which are laudable in a situation where some minorities (including women) are disadvantaged.

In the profession of public relations, the tendency toward convergence is exampled by moves by global or globally-affiliated agencies and consultancies to standardize and promote their own campaigning principles, and by multinational organizations that are consolidating, for example, their global issues management practices. Global initiatives by the

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professional bodies acting in consort, such as The Stockholm Accords (Global Alliance, 2013a) and the Melbourne Mandate (Global Alliance, 2013b), too can be interpreted as both standard-setting, but also consolidation and simplification attempts.

Theory development in public relations has gone down a parallel path, by devising convergent models (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009) and applying them either regionally, as in the European Model of public relations (van Ruler & Vercic, 2002; van Ruler, Vercic, Butschi, & Flodin, 2004) or world-wide through the theory of generic principles and specific applications (Vercic, Grunig, & Grunig, 1996; Grunig, 2009). These models have recognized limitations. For example the authors of the European model acknowledge the complexity and divergence of practice throughout Europe and accept that their attempt to define a distinctly European approach to the practice as being limited to identifying a series of 'characteristics' which more or less describe the practice. Certainly practitioners in the United Kingdom (UK) would find difficulty in choosing between whether their practice is more 'European' or more 'American' in orientation (Gregory, 2011a).

A prior question concerns the necessity or desirability of any regional or global model. As Tavis (2000) states, practitioners determine locally how to balance between the divergence of local needs and the convergence required by global organizations. Convergent models may help practitioners who work in the increasingly global world of public relations and in multiple contexts to categorize and analyze public relations and make their working lives simpler. However, the same models may also lead to double-binds for practitioners when global (very often 'western') norms clash with local ones. At the same time, convergent theoretical models can become irrelevant for practitioners who do not recognize their complex, daily practice in them.

This paper, while recognizing the legitimate search for commonalities and the attempt to set benchmarks and standards (although the question has to be asked, whose standards?), challenges the search for global public relations models and calls for a scholarship and a practice that embraces divergence and resists the temptation to converge, simplify and generalize. In doing so, it asserts that diversity will be a mark of both strength and a reflection of reality as the practice of public relations develops around the world. This paper discusses first and in brief, issues around hegemony and globalization; second, it looks at the success of hegemony in the UK as it has arguably succeeded to US practice with the resultant loss of heritage and richness this has brought. Thirdly, it looks at the pressures toward hegemony in Singapore, but calls for resistance against it; and finally it calls for an overall professional and epistemological stand against hegemony.

2. Explanations and explorations of hegemony and globalization

The words 'hegemony' and 'globalization' are multi-faceted concepts open to a multiplicity of interpretations; therefore in this section of the paper the authors will briefly explain and explore these notions.

2.1. Hegemony

In its original conceptualization, hegemony referred to the way an imperial power (the hegemon or leader state) ruled its geopolitical subordinates by the threat of force and implied power rather than by direct military rule (Hassing, 1994). It originated in ancient Greece where the city-state of Athens exercised dominance over other city states. The concept developed in the 19th century to include cultural predominance and can be seen in its fullest form when the European powers attempted to assert their hegemony on Asia and Africa in particular.

However it was Gramsci (1971); Howson & Smith, 2008) who elaborated and promoted a more sophisticated version of cultural hegemony. His assertion was that the dominant classes present their view of reality in such a way that it is the only sensible way of seeing things and is therefore accepted as common sense by other classes. Thereby they gain consent for their world-view. Gramsci (1971) claimed that the dominant classes exercised power in a range of spheres, including the economic, political and cultural, but also and crucially, that this extended to the state and civil society. It was in these spheres that hegemony was created and maintained. Clark (1977) defines hegemony as "how the ruling classes control the media and education", a narrow, but not untypical definition. Roper (2005) elaborates further:

> Hegemony can be defined as domination without physical coercion through the widespread acceptance of particular ideologies and consent to the practices associated with those ideologies (p. 70).

Quoting Bocock, Roper goes on to say that hegemony includes the notion of "moral and philosophical leadership" (Bocock, 1986, p. 11). This leadership is not achieved through democratic processes, but via the manufacturing of consent. It is a case of there not being a sensible alternative world-view. It would be wrong however, to view hegemony as a static concept. It can be challenged, but difficult to unseat because it is the 'common sense' of the particular discourses under consideration.

In public relations therefore, Excellence Theory, being the accepted dominant theory of the public relations sphere (Botan & Hazleton, 2009, p. 8), proved difficult to challenge until relatively recently (L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Roper, 2005). In the practice, the dominance of the large consultancies has brought ways of working and particular practices which are ubiquitous and difficult to challenge (more on this below).