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Imperializing spin cycles: A postcolonial look at public relations, greenwashing, and the separation of publics

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Abstract

This article draws on postcolonial theory to critique ongoing neocolonial aspects of public relations theory and practice and especially the field's recent appropriation of terms such as "corporate social responsibility" and "sustainable development." It positions such appropriation as a continuation of the old colonial strategy of reputation management among elite publics at the expense of marginalized publics. The article makes the case that public relations can only begin to be ethical and socially responsible if it acknowledges the diversity of publics, breaks down the hierarchy of publics, and takes into account the resistance of peripheral publics.
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1. Introduction

Sustainable development and social responsibility are the current buzzwords in the corporate world. Not surprisingly, therefore, the websites, annual reports, and brochures of top international organizations are full of carefully crafted accounts of "sustainable" and "socially responsible" projects such as poverty alleviation, protection of human rights, and the use of the four Rs (Reduce, Re-use, Recycle, and Re-think).

The visibility of these static, as well as interactive, media forums has been aided in no small measure by the felicitous use of text, technicolor, and technology by in-demand public relations professionals. Frankental (2001) even claims that "corporate social responsibility is an invention of PR" (p. 23). This communication-driven strategy, which scholars such as Athanasiou (1996) and Beder (2000) have called "greenwashing," allows corporations to manipulate an image of environmental, social, and cultural responsiveness.

This strategy continues a more established practice of corporate image transformation. It started towards the beginning of the 20th century when, as Bakan (2004) points out, corporates learned quickly that their survival and profitability required an image make-over from that of "soulless leviathans—uncaring, impersonal and amoral" to that of a "family—personal, human, friendly" (pp. 17–18). A century down the line, the image makeover strategies of corporations have moved from the friendly family to a green and socially just agenda, spurred on by the modern environmental movement's success in making "sustainable development" (SD) and "environmental justice" a part of

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our vocabulary. The new mantra of the born-again corporations is "corporate social responsibility" (CSR); the persistent chanting of this mantra, undertaken with suitable fervor, has tended to fall on believing ears, even of some environmental organizations.

Yet how plausible is the corporate commitment to the environment and human rights? What are the implications of actual corporate practices for social justice and environmental sustainability? Most critically, how is public relations implicated in the creation and maintenance of global corporate practices that have profound social and environmental consequences? This article draws on postcolonial theory to explore these questions, and, in the process, unravels the neocolonial thinking underpinning mainstream PR approaches to issues of sustainability and CSR.

In sketching the nature of PR-induced "corporate-speak" and corporations' actions in the context of their green claims, we need to recognize that corporations are unique, powerful institutions whose first and absolute mandate is to make money and enhance profits for their shareholders:

> The corporation lies, steals and kills without hesitation when it serves the interests of its shareholders to do so. It obeys the law only when the costs of crime exceed the profits. Corporate social responsibility is impossible except in so far as it is insincere. (Bakan, 2004, cover blurb)

In other words, CSR or SD rests on a platform of insincerity. From a PR point of view, this insincerity is manifested in the privileging of key publics such as shareholders over what are deemed to be peripheral publics (i.e., the masses of people who bear the brunt of corporate actions). There is a refusal in mainstream public relations literature to acknowledge the diversity of publics and the inequitable distribution of power among them. The absence of issues of power in PR theory is most evident in the U.S.-generated two-way symmetrical model (see Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Two-way symmetry was originally offered as an alternative to the practice of manipulative public relations that was essentially one-way in favour of the organization. However, despite its seeming egalitarianism, several scholars (see, e.g., Leitch & Neilson, 1997; L'Etang, 1996; Munshi, 1999; Pieczka, 1996) have shown how the two-way symmetrical model erroneously presumes a neutral interactive space for all publics and downplays the centrality of the dominant organizational core. The model ignores power differentials in society and, in the process, not only raises the possibility of legitimizing organizational control (Munshi, 1999), but also of fostering a manipulative and "paternalistic ideology to maintain the system of dominant-subordinate relations" (Adeola, 2001, p. 44). Clearly, as Pieczka (1996) asks: How "can it be possible to talk about decentralization, empowerment, and trust, and at the same time claim that to be effective public relations needs to be in the dominant coalition?" (p. 154).

It is in the interest of the dominant organizational core that public relations "manages" the corporate image through an asymmetric hierarchy of publics: (1) the predominantly Western shareholders; (2) the Western consumer public/the global middle-class consumer; (3) the Western activist public; (4) the vast numbers of Third World workers who produce the goods for consumption by others; and (5) the even greater numbers of Third World citizens too poor to consume. The first is obsessive about profits and share values, the second consumes blindly, and the third provides resistance from within the West, while the last two fall below the corporate radar. Corporate PR efforts, therefore, focus on undercutting the protests of the third public to appease the second public and directly benefit the first public. Its agenda has no place for the colonised fourth and fifth publics.

Within the unregulated global economy, this lopsided approach allows corporations to talk about ecological aims without giving up their determination to concentrate on profit making (Athanasiou, 1996). Despite all the talk about responsibility, equity, and sustainability, this strategic process fails to critically engage with the logic of what we call Capitalics—a politics fuelled by global capital (Kurian & Munshi, 2004). As a result, the world gets divided, along old colonialist lines, into two spheres: (1) a bottom-line-obsessed, and largely monocultural (read Western), "developed" space; and (2) an amorphous non-Western space outside the politically, economically, and culturally dominant structures of the "developed" world. There is no symmetry between these two spheres, nor is there a medium for a communicative interaction between them.

That mainstream PR favors the dominant organizational core is evident in Grunig's (2001) formulation: "Simultaneous fusion with the Other while retaining the uniqueness of one's self-interest seems to describe well the challenge of symmetrical public relations" (p. 28). It is this organizational self-interest that prompts Grunig et al. (2002) to conclude "that activism is good for an organization rather than bad" (p. xii) and that organizations that work with activists "make fewer decisions that result in negative publicity and regulation, litigation, and opposition" (p. xii). The central objective is clearly to ensure that the organization keeps negative publicity at bay. The organization's image is all that matters,