

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.

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1. Defining critical work

Methodologically critical work derives in the continental European context from the German tradition of *quellenkritik*—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 Frankfurt 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 transformatory 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,

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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 Verčič, 2003; Tilson & Alozie, 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:

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