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# Social networks, power, and public relations: *Tertius iungens* as a cocreational approach to studying relationship networks



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## ABSTRACT

One of the most important roles for public relations professionals is building relationships. The fundamental assumption behind the normative relationship-building role of public relations is that relationships among organizations and publics are mutually beneficial. However, some network theories (e.g., structural holes theory) prescribe that maintaining many organizational relationships is inefficient, instead suggesting that organizations should occupy a powerful network position by separating and controlling the flow of information between others. Under such theories, power comes in the form of *tertius gaudens* (the third who benefits at the expense of others). In this article we argue that such an approach to power in public relations is manipulative and unethical, and offer an alternative approach via the concept of *tertius iungens* (the third who joins others), which endorses connecting organizations and emphasizes the collective good.

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## 1. Introduction

New theories are often adopted and advanced by a scholarly discipline before the idiosyncrasies, possibilities, and consequences of such an adoption are explored. As Kuhn (1970) suggested, “a new theory, however special its range of application, is seldom or never just an increment to what is already known” (p. 7). New theories require adaptation and accommodation in order to fit into the established assumptions and existing practices of a field. Such is the case with social network theories and analysis in public relations. Scholars have used the method to study various relationship networks (cf., Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003; Sommerfeldt, 2013a) without first discussing the ethical fit of network theories within the scholarship or practice of public relations.

Network theory and social network analysis (SNA) are well established in management, business, and sociology, and a growing body of network research in communication and public relations has emerged over the last decade. The application of network research to public relations contexts has, by and large, taken a structural approach to the study of relationships. The structural approach fits squarely within a functional view of public relations—one that “sees publics and communication as tools or means to achieve organizational goals” (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 651). We believe network research can also take a “cocreational approach” that focuses on relationships among publics and organizations that create shared meanings and

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goals, and place an “implicit value on relationships going beyond the achievement of an organizational goal” (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652).

The idea that public relations professionals should be relationship builders has become a well-established part of the world-view of both academics and industry professionals (e.g., Ledingham, 2003). Yet, many basic assumptions of network theories actually run counter to the cocreational, dialogic, and socially oriented approaches to public relations that have gained prominence in recent years (cf., Heath, 2006; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Sommerfeldt, 2013b; Taylor, 2010). For example, the notion that organizational members fill “structural holes” (Burt, 1992), and are able to selfishly “broker” information for the good of themselves or their organization, shows little concern for the benefits of relationships to other stakeholders, stakeholders, or other publics and their role in the meaning-making process (cf. Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Perhaps unknowingly, public relations scholars have imported network concepts such as structural holes, brokerage, and power from the business literature whole cloth with little critical examination of how concepts like power are constructed in network research. We believe the way power has been reified in network research is flawed and unethical. The SNA approach to power raises questions for public relations researchers that must be addressed before network research can become fully integrated into public relations scholarship and mesh with the cocreational view of the practice.

The purpose of this article is to critically assess the assumptions of network research by problematizing the concepts of brokerage and *tertius gaudens*. We focus on ethical questions surrounding power in network theories, and offer a solution in the concept of “*tertius iungens*.” To that end, the article is organized into four sections. In the first section, we provide an overview of social network theory and analysis, how public relations researchers have used SNA, and identify the key SNA concepts used by researchers including brokerage and *tertius gaudens* (Burt, 1992). Section two takes up the concept of power in communication and public relations, and how it applies to SNA. The third section examines the contradiction inherent in SNA’s view of networks as a “power over” tool for manipulating others. Finally, section four introduces the concept of *tertius iungens* or “the third who joins” (Baker & Obstfeld, 1999; Lammers et al., 2009). Section four offers suggestions for how SNA research in public relations should move forward, and argues *tertius iungens* is a more ethical replacement for several SNA concepts based on power-over assumptions.

## 2. Social network theory and analysis

Network theories and social network analysis (SNA) are still new to public relations and have great potential for informing public relations theory and practice. In light of its relative newness and the necessity of new theories to mesh with the axiological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions of the field, a brief overview of SNA is provided here.

### 2.1. What is social network analysis?

Social network theory and its related methods go back more than 80-years to work in sociology, mathematics, and business management—a discipline that is arguably responsible for advancing the bulk of network theory and research (Scott, 2000). Generally speaking, network theories have sought to explain how individuals and groups interact, and how such interactions lead to various outcomes (Borgatti & Lopez-Kidwell, 2011). Network theories are concerned with three primary elements: (1) relations between individuals and groups, (2) how connections influence individuals and groups, and (3) how individuals and groups create, maintain, and transform networks (Knoke & Yang, 2008).

SNA refers to a methodology that examines the connections of individuals and other entities in a system. Terms like actors, nodes, and vertices are used to reference concepts such as individuals, groups, and organizations. The assessment of connections among actors includes examining concepts such as frequency, stability, multiplexity, strength, direction, symmetry/reciprocity, and others. The actors and the connections or relations among them create the network (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

As Monge and Contractor (2000) explained, “communication networks are the patterns of contact between communication partners that are created by transmitting and exchanging messages through time and space” (p. 440). Communication networks represent the patterns or points of contact among individuals and organizations in complex social, business, friendship, familial, and other networks. Network analysis has been used to examine the points of contact among communicators in a social media network (Beard & Yang, 2011; Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014; Saffer, Taylor, & Yang, 2013), among international actors in public diplomacy efforts and NGO activities (Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003, 2005, 2011; Yang & Taylor, 2010), among business units in a competitive market (Burt, Kilduff, & Tasselli, 2013), and among members of organizations (Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Treadway et al., 2013). Such research on patterns of contact among communicators examines the exchange of resources or information and how the overall network structure affects the potential agency of actors.

Many researchers in business management equate the exchange of information and communication studied by social network analysts as a resource exchange. The resource exchange emphasis in network research developed from the business management and resource dependency literature (cf. Mizruchi, 1994). As Haythornthwaite (1996) explained: “Social network analysis is an approach and set of techniques used to study the exchange of resources among actors (i.e., individuals, groups, and organizations)” (p. 323).

While SNA is clearly based on relational and resource-exchange patterns, true consideration of communication or relational dimensions is missing from the literature. Many researchers in public relations have advanced a cocreational

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