



Preach wine and serve vinegar: Public relations, relationships and doublethink



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 October 2013
Received in revised form 3 February 2014
Accepted 7 February 2014
Available online 11 June 2014

Keywords:

Public relations
Organization–public relationships (OPR)
Doublethink
Listening
Social media
Phronesis

ABSTRACT

This article argues that organization–public relationships (OPR) generate challenges for PR as both a practical and theoretical discipline. The investigation is set against the backdrop of the growing pre-occupation with OPR in research and practice. The study highlights disconnections between how the field represents itself in an OPR context and the existence of particular attitudes and practices in each of these areas. It uses the Orwellian concept of doublethink as a conceptual device to tease out these tensions. These contradictions are framed as public relations doublethink and presented as critical propositions designed to illustrate the gaps that can exist between representation and reality. The article also debates the implications of these examples for the practical and theoretical development of public relations using research that considers how organizations listen to stakeholders on-line. It seeks to stimulate further debate through a new conceptualization of social media listening, as well as a set of inter-disciplinary insights concerned with the study of complex phenomenon.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to highlight a particular disconnect between how the field represents itself in an organization–public relationship (OPR) context and the existence of specific attitudes and practices in the profession and academia. It shows that situations exist where both practitioners and scholars fall short of the challenges they set themselves in an OPR context. This includes the failure of practitioners to marry rhetoric with action and a gap in how researchers frame and then study organization–public relationships. To illustrate these examples of preaching wine and serving vinegar, the study uses the Orwellian concept of doublethink as a conceptual device to tease out such tensions. These contradictions are framed as public relations doublethink and presented as critical propositions designed to illustrate the gaps that can exist between representation and reality. This highlights that organization–public relationships (OPR) generate challenges for PR as both a practical and theoretical discipline.

Ledingham and Bruning (1998, 2000) have been at the vanguard of the OPR research movement since the late 1990s although other scholars promoted the need for public relations to focus on relationships (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1987; Ferguson, 1984) earlier. All argue that the central focus of PR should shift from communication to relationship management. They define organization–public relationships as “the state that exists between an organization and its key publics” providing

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“economic, social, political and/cultural benefits to all parties involved” creating a situation that is “characterized by mutual positive regard” (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). Although it is commonly cited, this definition of OPR should be treated with caution. According to Pohl (2010), for example, it excludes the negative relationships that can develop between an organization and other groups. Such an argument highlights that even formative thinking around OPR is contested territory and Macnamara (2012) provides a useful summary of the key disputes in this area.

This article’s exploration of doublethink is timely due to the increasing pre-occupation with the idea of organization–public relationships in both PR practice and theory. First, in the professional realm as evidenced by the recent activity associated with the re-imagining of PR as an industry underpinned by the idea of relationship rather than perception management (The Global Alliance, 2013a). Second, in the academy the complementary surge of scholarship concerned with understanding the nature of relationships is noted (Huang & Zhang, 2013). For the first, this article argues that such aspirations are blighted by issues associated with the willingness and capability of organizations to listen to their stakeholders. For the second, it highlights a disconnection between a discourse that acknowledges the complex nature of relationships and the reality of how they are being studied in PR.

The article also debates the implications of these examples for the practical and theoretical development of public relations using research that considers how organizations listen to stakeholders on-line. It seeks to stimulate further debate through a new conceptualization of social media listening, as well as a set of inter-disciplinary insights concerned with the study of complex phenomenon.

2. Doublethink as a lens of inquiry

The term doublethink originates from Orwell’s (1959) book *Nineteen Eighty Four*. This is a work of dystopian science fiction in which Orwell describes a totalitarian world of oppressive surveillance and mass mind control. It is the source of several terms that have now become embedded in the English language, the most well-known and popular being *Big Brother*. In Orwell’s novel, doublethink refers to the idea that people can simultaneously hold two opinions at the same time while “knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them” (Orwell, 1959, p. 31). In these situations they apply first one statement and then its opposite without regard to the tension that exists between them. For example, in *Nineteen Eighty Four* democracy in the state of Oceania is talked about as an impossibility and yet, at the same time, the ruling party is positioned as the guardian of democracy.

This article uses doublethink as a lens through which to examine how organization–public relationships are discussed in the PR field. Its approach is influenced by scholarship from outside of public relations, most notably Stacey (2012). By focussing on the contradictory elements of rhetoric in leadership and management, Stacey (2012) observes how leaders state explicitly that micro-management is bad but then, in another context, “claim that it is something they have to do and so something good” (p. 64). He then underlines the negative role that doublethink can play in organizations, particularly as a way of legitimizing activities associated with power and control. This is achieved by falsifying reality while simultaneously allowing people to think the reality they operate in has not been compromised.

Stacey (2012) frames this as a “conscious deception” that retains a “firmness of purpose with complete honesty” (p. 90). For example, despite leadership programmes claiming to be about change Stacey argues they amount to little more than training activities designed to maintain the status quo. Crucially, the contradiction inherent in this process of doublethink – along with the other illustrations he provides – is not noticed. Such dualism flourishes because people disregard inconvenient facts and truths. This article argues that comparable tensions can be identified in the discourse around organization–public relationships in PR and that this is evident in both practice and research. The study now shifts to a discussion of doublethink in both of these areas, concentrating first on PR practice and the context surrounding recent developments in the field.

3. A brave new world: re-imagining PR

The current emphasis public relations places on effective relationship management is underlined by the work of a leading professional organization. The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) is a confederation made up of professional associations and institutions from around the world. It purports to represent 160,000 practitioners and academics worldwide (Global Alliance, 2013b). GA’s new mandate for public relations, endorsed at its annual congress in Melbourne in November 2012, states that PR’s role is to “build and sustain strong relationships between an organization and its publics and, in doing so, contribute to society” (Global Alliance, 2013a). This declaration is an attempt to distance PR from the traditional framing of the profession as perception management to embrace instead the concept of relationship management.

This emphasis and the Global Alliance’s new positioning of public relations reflects, as much as it seeks to shape, what is happening in practice. This is illustrated through the case of Centrica, the United Kingdom’s biggest energy retailer and one of the country’s most prominent organizations. On its website Centrica (2014a) links its continuing success as a business with its ability to establish and maintain relationships with a wide range of groups and individuals. These include customers, employees, shareholders, suppliers, other partners, as well as the communities in which it operates. This capacity is strongly associated with its goal to become the UK’s most trusted energy company. It further recognizes that inherent in this mission is a commitment to stakeholder engagement as a means of listening and responding to a wide range of societal obligations and expectations. This focus is also reflected in the call-to-action at the heart of GA’s new mission. That is, the specific

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