



Changing conversation and dialogue through LeadSA: An example of public relations activism in South Africa



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ABSTRACT

The words of Lund and Nabavi, “we learn more about something if we talk about it” (2008, p. 27), highlight the importance of conversation and dialogue in bringing about change – be it in an organization or in society. In South Africa, given the country's history, changed and new conversations are needed even though dialogue across ethnic, social and political divides does not come naturally. Despite celebrating 20 years of democracy, South Africans still face many economic, social and moral challenges. These challenges manifest themselves through protest actions against the slow pace of improvement in the townships, frustration with lack of personal progress among young South Africans and a lack of tolerance and understanding of the “others” (Seekings, 2007). Unfortunately, change takes time and concerted effort (Eyre & Littleton, 2013); trust must be built and is earned through participation in open dialogue and mutual negotiation (Bardhan, 2011, p. 97). Public relations (PR) activism as a manifestation of the postmodernist worldview and PR activists as change agents are at the heart of this exploratory study of the role of public relations in South African society. This article investigates the principles and methods used by Pri-media Broadcasting South Africa's LeadSA initiative to start and facilitate social dialogue and to contribute to social change. Data were collected by means of interviews with key decision-makers at LeadSA. In addition, a variety of documents, such as electronic newsletters, internal documents and research reports, was analyzed. A case study approach was used to contextualize the theory and illustrate the principles and practices implemented by LeadSA.

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1. Introduction

Public relations in a democratic context enables open, accessible and transparent dialogue between a diverse group of participants through relationship-building and the promoting of trustworthy and open communication, which involves a variety of media platforms. Public relations is a factor in establishing communication opportunities for voluntary participation by various publics and public relations practitioners in order for them to influence the “conditions of their existence” and contribute to the development of social capital (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 283). Building trusting relationships with others whose opinions differ from one's own is an essential precondition for change and the building of social capital. The media play an important role in assisting individuals to restore trust in one another, and public relations practices are essential for establishing communities which share a common purpose and contribute to a fully functional society (Sommerfeldt, 2013).

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The research reported here was conducted to investigate the principles and methods used by Primedia Broadcasting South Africa's LeadSA initiative to start and facilitate social dialogue and contribute to social change. The LeadSA initiative is an example of an organization practicing public relations activism in South Africa and whose public relations practitioners are actively involved as change agents in societal issues. The dialogic theory of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002); third culture building (Bardhan, 2011; Casmir, 1999; Kent & Taylor, 2011), and agenda-setting theory were used as theoretical frameworks. Data were collected by means of interviews with key decision-makers at LeadSA. In addition, a variety of documents, such as electronic newsletters, internal documents and research reports, were analyzed. A case study approach was used to contextualize the theory and illustrate the principles and practices implemented by LeadSA.

2. Public relations practitioners as change agents

PR activism, as a dimension of a postmodern paradigm of public relations, challenges the normative views of the purpose and practices of public relations as promulgated by a functionalist approach to public relations. Traditionally, in public relations literature, activism has been associated with the activities of activist groups (Guiniven, 2002; Jo, 2011; Kovacs, 2001; Reber & Berger, 2005). Organizational objectives and the interests of activist groups were seen as antagonistic forces. Because activist groups usually opposed organizational actions (Brown, 2010; Smith & Ferguson, 2010), the relationships between activist groups and organizations were expected to be managed by public relations practitioners in the interest of the organization's sustainability. This approach has its roots in excellence theory (Grunig & Grunig, 1992), which to a large extent represented an organization-centric approach to public relations. Consequently, activism is often viewed as an issues management specialization area of public relations, with its key focus on ensuring the future existence of organizations and the elimination of risk factors (Wakefield, 2007).

Today, the concept of activism has evolved significantly and new views on the role of activism have emerged which are consistent with postmodern organizational perspectives. Conflict is no longer perceived as a negative social phenomenon (Bourland-Davis, Thompson, & Brooks, 2010, p. 409) with concepts such as "dissensus" and "tensors" included in a postmodern view of public relations. Tensors are events that may represent opposing or alternative views and the role of the public relations practitioner is to identify these tensors instead of striving for consensus (Holtzhausen, 2012, p. 63). Holtzhausen argues that dissensus, is needed in true transformation. These views call for the re-examination of the idea that public relations is inherently in service of corporate environments and political elites, by highlighting the application of public relations in service of activists and other organizations that represent social causes.

Defining public relations activism is difficult, as it relates more to a state of mind and the self-awareness of the practitioner than to a set of concepts. Holtzhausen (2005, 2012), speaking from a postmodern perspective, proposes that there is scope for public relations practitioners to assume the role of activists in organizations and society. The power struggle, competition and pervasiveness of conflict can be considered as basic assumptions behind postmodern society (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Therefore, the role of activist public relations practitioners is to stand up to oppressive power on behalf of those less powerful. Holtzhausen (2012, p. 64) states that activist behavior "forms part of a whole and is not the only identifying attribute", but rather presents practitioners with the opportunity to question long-standing beliefs and introduce alternative points of view.

Public relations practitioners as change agents in the functionalist or modernist approach are viewed as boundary-spanning agents (Grunig, 2000), responsible for the development of symmetrical communicative opportunities (Berger, 2007). In a postmodern view, public relations practitioners challenge issues of power, notably power on macro-levels such as organizations or government. A postmodern public relations activist not only challenges power structures on macro-levels, but also promotes the negotiation of power on micro-levels, for example between individual practitioners (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Bowen (2008) argues that public relations practitioners are ideally positioned to assist organizations in understanding publics and their perceptions of the organization. This understanding will include the active and passive involvement of public relations practitioners and stakeholders in societal issues, in organizational decision-making processes and in giving a "voice" to marginalized and unrepresented stakeholders (Holtzhausen, 2011, p. 158). Active involvement refers to activities planned to create opportunities for conversations and dialogue (Lund & Nabavi, 2008), requiring an attitude of resistance to normative thinking and practices from public relations practitioners, that lead to the sharing of thoughts and participation in conversations and dialogue that will contribute to social change. Change does not take place merely by having conversations and participating in dialogue (Eyre & Littleton, 2013); it needs to include a different manner of thinking and embracing relationships, serving the interests of both organizations and society (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Public relations practitioners should create opportunities for the development of new meanings based on different and opposing views, because creativity and innovative thinking are promoted in unstable and uncomfortable situations (Overton-De Klerk & Verwey, 2013). The emergence of online and mobile communication, interconnectivity and unlimited access to information has expanded the ways in which public relations practitioners can communicate with their publics (Radford, 2011) and take organization-publics conversations beyond organization-centered topics. Through the use of these communication platforms, organizations can participate in the societal dialogue (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011), going beyond organizational problems (Hallahan, 2007) and thereby possibly influencing social change.

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