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Bridging the gap: Mapping the relationship between activism and public relations



Erica L. Ciszek*

Jack J. Valenti School of Communication, University of Houston, 101 Communication Bldg, Houston, TX 77204, USA

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally activists have received more attention as external publics than as users of public relations themselves. This article reviews the dominant literature that positions public relations in contrast to activism and suggests theoretical directions for bridging the gap between activism and public relations. This critical essay provides a brief historical outline of activism in public relations literature, identifying gaps and proposing the cultural-economic model (CEM; Curtin & Gaither, 2005) as a way to propel scholarship of activism and public relations forward. This article presents the CEM as a heuristic theoretical framework to examine how activism and public relations are not always antagonists but sometime synonymous.

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1. Public relations in activism

This critical essay considers the relationship between activism and public relations practice and theory. While public relations theory has had a historical animosity to activism (Demetrious, 2013; p. 26), evidence suggests that activists have been implementing public relations for at least 100 years. In fact, a modest body of literature suggests that many of the tactics used by activists are public relations tactics, and their motives can be viewed as public relations strategies. Smith (2005), (p. 6) broadly defines activism as a process by which a group of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions that they find problematic. Activist organizations strive to raise awareness, change attitudes, and encourage or discourage certain actions (Taylor & Das, 2010) by targeting social norms, embedded practices, policies, or the dominance of certain social groups (Zoller, 2009).

Throughout history, individuals and groups doing public relations have been involved in social reform that eliminated slavery, reduced the oppression of women and minorities, and improved the health and wellbeing of people (Grunig, 1994). During the late 19th century, populist and progressive organizations challenged the power of monopolistic organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). By directing efforts toward governmental and corporate social change, abolitionists, suffragists, and labor organizers acted as public relations practitioners. In their examination of Frederick Douglass' Fourth of July Address, Heath and Waymer (2009) note how anti-slavery groups lobbied, worked to create alliances, raised money, mobilized resources, engaged in media relations and community relations, and advocated for policy reform. Similarly, during the 1960s, activists employed public relations to engage corporations by developing and utilizing many of the modern tools of public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; p. 52).

* Tel.: +1 617 842 9085.

E-mail address: Ciszekelciszek@central.uh.edu

Some public relations scholars have argued that, while not typically as sophisticated in resources and scope as the organizations and institutions they target, activist groups use similar tactics and strategies to reach publics and achieve goals (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). Grunig and Grunig (1997) suggested that activist groups might practice public relations in the same way as other groups or organizations. Activist communication efforts, therefore, are driven by objectives that are not that different from other organizations that use public relations to pursue strategic goals and maintain the organization (Smith, 2005; p. 7).

Activism has increasingly become a growing interest among public relations scholars. However, extant scholarship lacks a nuanced conceptualization of the dynamic interplay between activism and public relations. This critical essay provides a brief historical outline of activism in public relations literature, identifying gaps and proposing the cultural-economic model (CEM; Curtin & Gaither, 2005) as a framework for propelling research of activism and public relations forward.

2. A survey of activism in public relations research

Despite an emerging interest in activism and public relations, for years, these public relations activities have not been recognized by scholars as such because they issued from activist groups, not organizations per se. The majority of research in the field takes an organization-centered stance toward activism, as illustrated by the book title *Managing Activism: A Guide to Dealing With Activists and Pressure Groups* (Deegan, 2001). Until recently, activists have been viewed as external publics to an organization—rather than as public relations practitioners themselves—a perspective grounded in the functionalist approaches underlying much public relations theory.

Functionalism views societies as integrated, harmonious, cohesive ‘wholes’ or ‘social systems’ (O’Sullivan, 1994; p. 124). Thus, a functionalist view of public relations leads to an ideal perspective in which all parts of an organization function to maintain equilibrium, consensus and social order (p. 124). Viewing publics and communication as a means to achieve organizational ends (Botan & Taylor, 2004), a functionalist perspective emphasizes the production of strategic organizational messages and diagnosing what stands in the way of organizational success. Within functional perspectives, activists are obstacles the organizations must navigate.

Scholars have devoted much research to organizational responses to activism, particularly the role of public relations practitioners in mediating these relations. For example, Lerbinger (1997) states that activists pressure organizations into crisis mode by organizing groups to press demands and gain public support. Similarly, activists, according to Sriramesh (2010), (p. 703), coalesce around problems caused by organizational activities, and attempt to resolve issues by way of education through publicity campaigns, lobbying government for greater regulation, media relations, and sometimes even radical action. In particular, role theory, systems theory, and excellence theory have embodied this functionalist perspective and have driven much research in the field.

2.1. Role theory

The organizational role of practitioners has been one of the most studied areas of public relations (Pasadeos, Renfro, & Hanily, 1999). In the 1970s, Broom developed a typology of roles to account for public relations practitioners’ multitude of activities and responsibilities. Practitioners were identified as consultants to the dominant coalition – those members of an organization with the collective power to make strategic decisions and change organizational structure (Robbins, 1990).

According to role theory, power is inherent in the roles individuals enact (Katz & Kahn, 1966); power is conceptualized as an individual’s ability to influence another’s behavior (Dahl, 1957). Depending on their involvement in decision-making, public relations practitioners may hold different kinds of power, and the effectiveness of an organization depends on the extent to which public relations is considered in goal setting and program planning. Individuals involved in decision making identify publics important to the organization, conduct environmental scanning, and make policy decisions (Grunig, 1992a). Within this framework, activists are conceptualized as entities that need to be monitored and managed. Thus, it is the role of public relations practitioners in management positions to serve as the liaison between the organization and these potentially problematic publics.

Role theory legitimized the profession of public relations and the argument that public relations professionals should have a seat at the management table, framing public relations as a management function. Role theory was then incorporated into a broader theoretical approach to the field—systems theory.

2.2. Systems theory

Systems theory has guided public relations since the 1980s. Biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) first proposed systems theory to account for complex behaviors and relationships among system components and how effectively they adapt to the environmental system in which they are a part. It posits that organizations are organic entities that engage dynamically with their environments. Communication is the central mode by which organizations structure themselves and acclimate to their environment. According to systems theory, the role of public relations is to balance the forces internal and external to the organization. Practitioners are both part of the system, as technicians or managers or both, as well as boundary spanners (e.g., Vasquez, 1996) between the organization and its environment.

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