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Is the universe of democracy, rhetoric, and public relations whole cloth or three separate galaxies?

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of democracy, rhetoric, and public relations can conclude that these aspects of society and professional practice are contradictory paradoxes or partners for achieving harmony of collective interests. To that end, this paper briefly explores the rhetorical heritage as inseparable from democracy. It next examines, through the challenges of the public arena, ways that deliberative democracy can bring the three into partnership for the greater good. On this foundation, it features four premises of public relations and democracy based on power, infrastructure, private and public sphere, collective voices, language that co-manages meaning as social construction, and stewardship. As stewards of democracy, organizations can play a pivotal role in fostering environments, the infrastructures and collaborative processes, that allow and even facilitate collective decision making as well as blend the private sphere (individualism) and the public sphere (collectivism) so that self-interest can be satisfied and enjoyed by organizations and myriad publics as collective interests. By blending individual voices into collective voices and understanding the limits and pitfalls of language as culture, public relations can actually serve private interests by the co-management of meaning to make society better.

> Corporations are able to reinforce their influence over the global economy by spending vast sums of money affecting political decisions, and public opinion. This level and type of corporate activity is ultimately to the detriment of democracy, society and the environment. (Makwana, 2006)

At the turn of the 21st century, a Business Week/Harris Poll demonstrated that U.S. residents felt that "Corporate America" played a major role in the nation's prosperity, was recognized and rewarded for that prosperity, made solid products, and competed well in the global economy. At the same time 70–75% of those persons polled deemed that U.S. corporations had far too much power and that the federal government ignored the interests of everyday people. Other surveys indicate similar sentiments (OpenSecrets, 2012; Saad, 2011). According to economists Piketty and Saez (2003) and Saez (2012), in the United States during the past decade wealth has become even more highly concentrated in a relatively few hands, and according to Wolff (2010) leaving only 15% of the wealth for the bottom 80%, the wage and salary workers, in 2010. These conclusions suggest that whereas the free market system is productive and appears to be democratic and participatory, the scale actually may have the finger of large organizations tipping the weight to their advantage. Typically aiding and sometimes leading to tip that scale is a corporate function and academic discipline that goes by many names: Public relations, communication management, strategic communication, issues management, public affairs, corporate communication(s), and external affairs.

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As such, the "discipline" continues to suffer a role identity crisis, brought into focus, at least in part, by the fact that iconic practitioners such as Ivy Lee and John W. Hill brought journalistic values into public relations as reflecting and contributing to democracy. Lee (Hiebert, 1966; St. John, 2006) and Hill believed that for all of its thorns and challenges, public relations in conjunction with journalism could advance society through the democratic process. Seeing the need for management to learn from the variety of positions being advocated by various voices, Hill (1958) observed, "Good corporate public relations depend, first, upon sound policies truly in the public interest and second, upon clear and effective communication, explanation, and interpretation of policies and facts to the public" (p. 163). By that logic, no organization was greater than the community where it operated; citizens were presumed to help craft and sustain society through reasoned and ethical discourse.

In contrast to this distribution of power and decision making, Bernays (1923, 1955) championed the crystalizing of opinion, the engineering of consent. Insights provided by psychology drove his definition and role of the practice rather than the democratic ideal. Bernays featured the public relations expert as being able (and even gifted) in the ability to shape (crystalize or engineer) the opinions of consumers to the benefit of client businesses. Bernays epitomized the elite communicating in ways that helped publics to make decisions in the corporate or privileged interest and thus subverting and shaping democracy to serve the clients' interests, as opposed to conceptualizing public relations as one voice among others, each of which is committed or at least should strive toward commitment to the collective making of enlightened choices.

A rhetorical rationale of public relations views it as capable of participating in constructive dialog, by which humans are compelled to make enlightened choices (Nichols, 1963). For example, democracy requires an informed public, a need that public relations has the ability to fulfill by providing information to media that readers, listeners, viewers, and users can use to make informed judgments. It was therefore not only beneficial but also necessary for practitioners to work as partners with journalists to create and inform a democratic society. Both public welfare and transparency are thus paramount, but not fully adequate, to the optimal functioning of public relations.

Within a representative democracy, corporations have been criticized for privatizing "public opinion so that it supports their business plans. . . thus resulting in self-interested, nondialogic communication" (Palenchar, 2011, p. 571; also see Boyd and Waymer's (2011) discussion of the potentially corrupting tensions among self-interests). Long-term observer of such matters, Domhoff (e.g., 1983, 2006) routinely asks an intriguing question: How is it possible to have such extreme corporate domination in a democratic country? In his work, he highlighted the tactics of the corporate elite to maintain their elite status and subsequently perpetuate immense power differentials in our society. Power does not mean complete control but rather the ability to manage and orchestrate related dialog that reinforces elite status, obstructs those who question such status, or constructs a shared culture or understanding of democracy that rarely questions the origins of their beliefs or the process through which these beliefs about democracy arose.

In the context of such paradoxes, we explore two theoretical questions focused on democracy and the role public relations can play in helping to make society a better place to live and work. First, if this corporate activity (in all of its functional and structural aspects and by its various names) can be detrimental to democracy and society, can public relations scholarship aid the practice and society achieve more democratic ends? If the answer to this question is "yes," as the authors believe, then our second question is what role, if any, should rhetorical public relations play in democracy and the democratic process? The underpinning assumption of that claim is that democracy, at least since the age of Greece and in the Greek tradition, has been associated with rhetoric as its means for public, collaborative decision making, and that democracy only flourishes when multiple voices and therefore multiple interests work collectively in the public sphere rather than seek some more narrow advantage behind closed doors and within veiled organization decision-making. To answer these questions, four foundational premises regarding public relations and democracy will be discussed, including: (1) democracy requires infrastructures (systems and arenas) that allow and even facilitate collective decision-making; (2) democracy requires a blending of the private sphere (individualism) and the public sphere (collectivism) so that self-interest can be satisfied in both; (3) democracy requires structures that allow for and encourage the blending of individual voices into collective voices; and (4) democracy requires language that co-manages meanings as social construction without privileging one interest at the disadvantage of other. We begin, however, by examining the rationale for the connections among public relations, rhetoric and democracy.

1. Classical origins: rhetoric and democracy

Since the Golden Age of Greece, rhetoric has been the rationale and mechanism for democracy, and thereby the queen (lady or grand dame, see Brummett, 1995; L'Etang, 1996) of communication studies. Campbell (1996) championed rhetoric as "the study of what is persuasive," a means for collectively examining "social truths," and it is "a humanistic study that examines all the symbolic means by which influence occurs" (p. 8).

Classical scholar Kennedy (1963) connected rhetoric to the spirit of democracy in ancient Greece: "In its origin and intention rhetoric was natural and good: it produced clarity, vigor, and beauty, and it rose logically from the conditions and qualities of the classical mind" (p. 3). Aristotle and Isocrates, among others, reasoned that no individual was imbued with such mental powers. If not, then what was a society to do? The answer was to forge solutions to the paradoxes and problems of the human condition through public contest. That contest pits the individuals' (including elites) private thoughts into public wrangles.