



The civility of social capital: Public relations in the public sphere, civil society, and democracy

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have analyzed public relations' role in democracy via proxy concepts like the public sphere and civil society. However, some have critiqued the public sphere on grounds of equal access and portrayed civil society as a guise for first-world imperialism. These critiques have implications for the role of public relations in the public sphere and civil society. This article suggests the normative role of public relations in democracy is best perceived as creating the social capital that facilitates access to spheres of public discussion and in maintaining relationships among those organizations that check state power. To that end, the paper argues that social capital does much to advance public relations theory and prescribe the role of public relations in democracy. Several implications for public relations from a social capital perspective are offered, including the creation of generalized societal trust, the building of cross-cutting or "weak" ties, the engagement of media on behalf of subaltern counterpublics, and the (re)creation of community or a fully functioning society.

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An inevitable problem for considering the role of public relations in democracy is that the concept of democracy is neither clear nor unequivocal. Perhaps given these ambiguities, scholars have considered the facilitative role that public relations plays in the communicative frameworks and processes that are thought to *support* a robust democracy. Previous attempts to address the role of public relations in facilitating democracy—apart from its inherent connections to a capitalist economy—have approached the subject somewhat indirectly. Namely, scholars have interrogated public relations' role in democracy via proxy communication concepts such as the public sphere (e.g., Davis, 2000; Hiebert, 2005; Raupp, 2004, 2011) and civil society (e.g., Taylor, 2000a,b, 2009; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005).

These theories, and the role of public relations within them, are not without their critics. Normative conceptualizations of the public sphere and civil society have been criticized as inequalitarian, for subjugating the views of marginalized or subaltern publics, and as a covert form of imperialism that forcibly integrates developing nations into a neo-liberal economy (e.g., Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Fraser, 1990). These critiques have indirectly pointed out an alternative framework for public relations in democracy—one that contrives of public relations as building social capital.

This present work argues the normative role of public relations in democracy is best perceived as creating the social capital that facilitates access to spheres of public discussion and policy formation as well as for maintaining networks among those organizations that check the power of the state and maintain social infrastructure. To that end, the paper suggests that the concept of social capital does much for public relations theory development and in prescribing the role of public relations in the public sphere and civil society. Moreover, a social capital perspective helps to answer the critiques of those who have questioned the normative depiction of these theories in advancing democracy and the role of public relations within them.

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The article begins by explaining the public sphere and civil society and how public relations has been perceived to contribute to each. Critiques of these concepts are presented. The article then argues that a social capital view of the public sphere and civil society is particularly relevant for public relations to answer these criticisms, and to frame public relations' contributions to democracy and democratization efforts.

1. The public sphere, publicity, and public relations

Perhaps no other conceptual framework has been so closely associated with the advancement of democracy than that of the public sphere. As originally described by Habermas (1989), discussions in public places among those with common interests flourished in late 17th century Europe. In these spaces, Habermas argued, differences of wealth and status could be temporarily set aside with the goal of reaching a common ground through reasoned debate. While such discussions were primarily among the bourgeois businessmen of the day and centred on matters of commerce, scholars have seized upon the notion of a public sphere of discussion as a conceptual resource in countless studies.

The public sphere has been described as situated between the state and society (Habermas, 1996), yet also as vital to the maintenance of democracy. While the discourse within the sphere does not result in binding decisions, it generates the public opinion that comments on or is critical of decision-making at the state level (Fraser, 1990). It is precisely the non-governmental nature of the sphere that is thought to abet a sustainable democracy, in that it “can serve as a counterweight to the state” (Fraser, p. 75). The public sphere preserves democracy as it helps to balance social stability and change (Castells, 2008). The sphere allows for the discussion of public issues, “a network for communicating information and points of view” (Habermas, p. 360) and “a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state” (Fraser, p. 58). The public sphere checks the power of the state in that it “[subjects] persons or affairs to public reason, and [makes] political decisions subject to appeal before the court of public opinion” (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974, p. 55). Ideas that survive public scrutiny in the sphere are more likely to affect policy and decision-making as such ideas are likely to advance public interests. A public sphere in which multiple competing voices may be heard is thus central to the functioning of democracy.

Essential to the public sphere is the principle of “publicity,” or as Habermas wrote in German, *Öffentlichkeit*—the closest literal translation in English being “openness” or “opennicity” (Klienstuber, 2001). Kleinstuber explained that the term *Öffentlichkeit* is concerned with that which is open or accessible to everyone, but also includes meanings like “making something public” or “to discuss in public” (p. 98). Ideas must become public to receive public deliberation. As such, some have taken an instrumental or enacted view of publicity, in that it is something to be used or wielded. Asen (2000) has noted that publics may engage in publicity because they have a belief in the “transformative” power of discourse (p. 429). In Asen's view, a public can adopt a “publicist” orientation as opposed to an isolationist orientation, which implies proactively engaging in public life via communication. Downey and Fenton (2003) asserted that publics are inherently tied to publicity. Publics are in need of attention in order to sustain their existence, and must work to secure such attention.

If the public sphere can be conceived of as public space for communication, publicity is the attempt to “attract attention for issues and messages in the different arenas of public communication and/or to influence the processes of public discussion” (Raupp, 2004, p. 314). Habermas (1989) asserted that publics must be able to affect a “critical publicity” for a true and fully-functioning public sphere. Such is a premise for the essential role of public relations in the public sphere: to enable publics to affect a publicity such that issues are publicly considered within the sphere.

The public sphere is public work, and public opinion requires public dialogue (Hauser, 1998). Public relations as a public advocacy function (cf. Edgett, 2001) is essential to generate the necessary publicity for individual and organizational participation in public dialogues that eventuate in public opinion. Public relations is necessary to ensure the existence of competing interests in the public sphere, as these interests ensure the fair debate of public issues. Hiebert (2005) has argued that “democracy can only exist when competing interests can occupy the public sphere” (p. 1). Public relations provides the agency to facilitate these competing interests.

Public spheres, however, do not emerge spontaneously. A functioning public sphere, if it works as a successful democratic institution, “represents the potential for people *organized in civil society* to alter their own conditions of existence by means of rational-critical discourse” (Calhoun, 1993, p. 279, emphasis added). Public spheres of discussion are made possible by civic participation and organizations that are organized favorably in support of issues. Public spheres arise as part of civil society.

2. Civil society and the need for relationships

As Gibson (2001) has noted, “few concepts have captured the imagination of those studying democratization more than ‘civil society’” (p. 51). Theories of civil society have maintained that a successfully functioning democracy requires a set of autonomous organizations that check the power of the state and build social infrastructure (Gibson, 2001; Hauser, 1998). Civil society is enhanced by levels of individual participation in civic organizations and by their political engagement (Putnam, 1993). The people, organizations, and systems of relationships that comprise civil society exist independently and freely operate in a realm outside of government, yet contribute to government's successful functioning. Civil society exists whenever and wherever voluntary organizations “deliberately try to mould [sic] the governing rules of society” (Scholte,

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