



Transforming the city: The potential for urban ethnographies of PR The case of Latin America

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ABSTRACT

Framed within García Canclini's concept of cultural hybridity, this paper will argue that "the city" and, consequently, the field of urban anthropology, offers great potential for the study of public relations and its audiences. Urbanisation will be one of the twenty-first century's biggest drivers of global economic growth (Dobbs et al., 2011) and public relations efforts will need to adapt to reflect the shifting urban environment. We will propose that cities provide opportunities for exploring the meanings, confines and possibilities of public relations as a socio-cultural practice. We will consider how ethnographically-inspired research can help us to further understand how public relations is understood and practised, both formally and informally, in large metropolitan cities and how public relations is influenced by, and can contribute to, urban cultural life. We will propose an ethnographic framework for research to explore the phenomenology of everyday lived experiences of public relations (PR) in relation to the complexity of the global processes which shape today's cities and the PR practices which take place within them. To contextualise our proposed research framework, we will draw on two particular cases from our own work: one of a project now completed in Mexico City, Mexico, and the other, a project in progress, in Lima, Peru.

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1. Introduction

In this paper we take as our point of departure the argument that generic theories and models of public relations (for example, *PR Excellence* – Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and culture (Hofstede, 1980) as well as the "grand narratives" such as globalisation and neo-liberalism that are used to explain PR should be contested and cannot be applied to explain public relations across the world (Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Hodges, 2006; L'Etang, 2010; L'Etang, 2011 amongst many others). Instead, we argue that public relations scholars need to shift focus from countries as a whole (i.e. defining culture at the level of "the nation") to the cities (and consequent urban cultures) within them (Dobbs et al., 2011). Urbanisation will be one of the twenty-first century's biggest drivers of global economic growth (Dobbs et al., 2011) and public relations efforts will need to adapt to reflect the shifting urban environment.

The city as a site of continuous transformation offers great potential for the study of public relations (PR) and its audiences (Hodges, 2011). Cities offer opportunities for exploring the meanings, confines and possibilities of public relations as a socio-cultural practice. Our aim in this paper is to discuss how ethnographically-inspired research might help us to further understand how public relations is understood and practised in large metropolitan areas, and how public relations is influenced by, and can contribute to, urban cultural life. We will focus our discussion on Latin American urban society and draw on two particular cases from our own work: one of a project now completed in Mexico City, Mexico and the other, a

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project in progress, in Lima, Peru. We will explore the potential for ethnographies of both formal and informal “cultures” of PR, as well as urban consumer and/or audience cultures. We will frame our argument within the broader context of cultural intermediation to suggest that public relations, as a form of persuasive or promotional communication, plays an intermediary role that is fundamentally concerned with producing, sustaining and regulating cultural meaning (Edwards & Hodges, 2011, p. 3), therefore, influencing diverse aspects of daily life.

Inspired by the work of the Argentine anthropologist and scholar now residing in Mexico City, Nestor García Canclini (1995, 1997, 2001, 2005), we seek to explore aspects of the transformative potential of public relations in these two distinct Latin American cities. We will consider how ethnographic research might enable us to explore more deeply how public relations could be conceptualised and practiced across various locales, markets, institutions, communities, public spaces, discourses and social networks within “the city” (Tajbakhsh, 2000, p. 1); how actors performing such activities might navigate circuits of culture and power, and the ways in which they participate in the possibilities offered by complex urban relational systems (Hodges, 2011, p. 34). Public relations will be considered through the lens of cultural intermediation, as a “transmitter of culture, which works on the transformation of meanings for a larger public” (Bovone, 1994 in Bovone, 2005, p. 362). We will reflect on the ways in which forms of persuasive communications are embedded within both Mexican and Peruvian society, acknowledging the complex cultural realities that exist in both cities.

2. Why study the city?

In 2008, for the first time in history, more than half of the world’s population were recorded as living in towns and cities according to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2007). By 2025, developing region cities of the City 600, in particular, will be home to an estimated 235 million middle-class households with an income of more than \$20,000 a year (Dobbs et al., 2011). Scholars need to embrace opportunities to take advantage of the new knowledge to be gained about cities, particularly knowledge which is produced in the context of globalisation, and place emphasis on the ways in which globalizing processes are understood in different disciplines (Huysen, 2008, p. 2). It is surprising that the public relations industry, to date, has paid scant attention to “the city”. When it has, it has tended to be in terms of statistics of audiences, consumers or population densities which are then taken out of context and translated using market research or PR classification systems into target publics (Cronin, 2006; Sison, 2009). Cities are more than a sheer number of people, buildings and infrastructure, they are about ideas, aspirations and imaginaries (Cronin & Oakley-Brown, 2010; Hodges, 2011). Capturing this by way of ethnographies of “the city”, scholars and practitioners can use this “thick” data to inform the design and development of public relations campaigns. As Jayne (2006, p. 1) argues, studies of cities as sites of communication and consumption helps to shed light on “seemingly globally ubiquitous change” – relating to politics and administration; migration and the structure of the market place; mass tourism; cultural and sports events; as well as everyday habits, rituals and lifestyles – “where and how we spend our leisure time; [...] where and what we eat; where and when we do our shopping; what we wear; how we decorate our homes, and so on.”

It is also timely to consider the different roles played by public relations in “fashioning the city” (Crewe, 1998), together with the diverse histories of practice and the use of formal and informal PR techniques by individuals, groups and organisations. Throughout history, cities have been shaped by movement (Ingold, 2008) and profoundly influenced by migration. Whilst, the literature on ethnic and migrant entrepreneurship in cosmopolitan centres remains inconclusive, it is suggested that migrant entrepreneurs can be instrumental in giving certain sectors a new lease on life (Jayne, 2006, p. 62). Furthermore, there have been government and industry-led initiatives to promote “creative cities” buzzing with innovation, creativity and entrepreneurialism (Jayne, 2006; Scott, 2004; Scott, 2006). The city is a place that is constantly changing through social and material relations and practices. If we ask ourselves how PR fits within this, public relations acts as a discursive force within urban society, which shapes social and cultural values, attitudes and beliefs in order to legitimate certain interests over others (Edwards & Hodges, 2011, p. 3). Viewing PR through an ethnographic lens allows us to appreciate how the practice is inherently linked to broader socio-cultural and political processes that are taking place in urban society, how new social and cultural relations shape PR, and vice versa, as well as the role of PR in communicating the changes taking place in cities. It is through the study of cities, PR and consumption that “a range of seemingly diverse but interconnected elements can be brought together” (Jayne, 2006, p. 1).

3. Promotional culture in an urban context

PR practice can be studied as both a general topic that helps us to describe global practices and processes and also in more specific ways to explain local differences. The mass promotion of commodities and proliferation of western cultural industries within emerging markets has led some to argue that a process of homogenisation is occurring where the domination of US and, to a lesser extent, European culture is undermining local uniqueness and diversity of societies across the world. Indeed, traditionally, anthropologists have suggested that capitalism has produced a situation where “genuine” folk culture of the people has been destroyed by a highly commercialised and standardised mass culture (García Canclini, 2005). What we find in the examples of “the city” discussed in this paper is that this is not necessarily the case. What we see instead, is a new urban experience which fuses tradition with existing and new cultures, and this is reflected in the nature of PR and the communication activity that is produced.

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