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Public Relations Review



Cultural intermediaries and the circuit of culture: The Digital Ambassadors project in Johannesburg, South Africa

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Circuit of culture
Culture-centred approach
Public relations
Cultural intermediaries
Digital Ambassadors project
South Africa

ABSTRACT

The question raised by [Cheney and Christensen \(2001\)](#) as to “what a non-Western, non-managerial and non-rationalist form of public relations will look like” (p.182), together with the call made by [Gregory \(2014\)](#) for public relations practitioners (PRPs) to be active social change agents, motivated this paper. The aim of this research is to follow a culture-centred approach and apply the circuit of culture ([Curtin & Gaither, 2005](#)) to investigate the meanings that young people (aged 18 to 34), as cultural intermediaries, ascribe to their participation in a digital empowerment project implemented by the City of Johannesburg, South Africa. This research forms part of a larger, ongoing multi-disciplinary research project.

The research highlights the complexity of projects of this nature, the wide variety of stakeholders involved, the significance of structure, the importance of training of cultural intermediaries, and the benefits such intermediaries gain from their involvement. A key finding is that self-development and financial benefit contribute significantly to the success of cultural intermediaries. This paper contributes to the field of public relations by providing an analysis of cultural intermediaries’ contribution to the circuit of culture as influenced not only by production and consumption but also by identity and regulation as seen in the way they represented the meaning created during their experience.

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1. Introduction

Currently, research into public relations as a practice aimed at social change and the transformation of communities within developing countries, such as South Africa, is lacking ([Macnamara, 2015](#)). Public relations has too often been defined with solely an organisational focus in mind. Moving away from such a narrow definition allows for a paradigmatic shift to occur, one that includes consideration of the cultural economy and the theoretical development of public relations as practised rather than as a prescriptive set of rules that dictate how PR should be practised ([Curtin & Gaither, 2005](#)). PR, as a social practice, provides opportunities for bottom-up support, co-creation of knowledge, addressing citizen concerns and the design of projects that empower citizens and enhance collaboration ([Hodges & McGrath, 2011; p. 90](#)). Public relations practitioners are seen as ‘influencers’ who actively produce meaning ([Edwards, 2013](#)) within a specific context at a particular

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time (Holtzhausen, 2000). This cultural intermediary role has been explored by various critical, postmodern and culture-centred public relations scholars.

The efforts of cultural intermediaries can influence identity and meaning in the production, distribution and consumption of communication (Macnamara & Crawford, 2013). Public relations practitioners are seen as cultural intermediaries as they are responsible for arranging engagements between various cultures and groups whilst being actively involved in creating a third, or different, cultural identity (Benecke & Oksitucz, 2015). PRPs are seen as “cultural agents operating mainly on the production and consumption levels in order to create meaning through the shaping and transfer of information” (Berger, 1999 in Curtin & Gaither, 2005; p.107) with the meaning manifesting around artefacts, attitudes and behaviours (Edwards, 2013; p. 441). The role of PRPs as cultural intermediaries within a cultural economy is essential, but the influence they wield is not restricted to PRPs only. Due to collaborative practices in developmental contexts, PRPs are often assisted and complimented by other active participants. The culture-centred approach to PR aligns itself with other critical theories in that it recognises and represents ‘the subaltern voice as a legitimate producer of knowledge’ (Dutta, Ban & Pal, 2012, p. 3). Subaltern voices and marginalised groups include those on the fringes of economic wellbeing such as unemployed youths.

The roles of PRPs and other individuals in social change activities are not always clearly delineated due to the co-constructive and collaborative nature of communication (Daymon & Holloway, 2002; Gregory, 2014). The efforts of PRPs cannot be artificially applied to events (seen as ‘fixing’) but should form an integral part of every aspect of communication, including the histories, personal interpretations and new meanings developed through interactions (Macnamara & Crawford, 2013). The culture-centred approach recognises conflict but, instead of the negative view of conflict adopted within the boundary spanning theory of PR, conflict and difference are seen as inherent to the circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; p.108) and are regarded as conditions to be recognised and used to inform future practice (Macnamara, 2015). Holtzhausen (2000) supports this view in stating that new meanings are created within conflict and dissent (cited in Curtin & Gaither, 2005; p.108). A wide range of contexts, each with its unique characteristics and culturally-diverse participants, has introduced the need for a culture-centred understanding of and approach to transformation within a young democracy such as South Africa, addressing the question posed by Cheney and Christensen (2001) as to what a non-Western, non-managerial and non-functional form of public relations will look like.

The specific research question investigated in this study was: what meanings are ascribed by young cultural intermediaries to the Digital Ambassadors project described below. The notion of the circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) offers a pragmatic approach to investigate this research question as it defines public relations as “a signifying practice that produces meaning within a cultural economy, privileging identity, difference and power because of the central role these constructs play in discursive practices” (p.110). The circuit of culture approach further positions PR as a culturally-relative practice that takes into account the richness and experience of practices outside the Western, corporate-centred normative approach to PR (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; p.106; Macnamara, 2015).

Research data were collected through interviews with the Jozi Digital Ambassadors (JDAs), their mentors, and project leaders involved with the Digital Ambassador project of the City of Johannesburg (CoJ). Qualitative content analysis of reflective and progress reports, together with observation during training sessions, was also used in this qualitative study in order to obtain information regarding the role of PR as a meaning-making practice in society. This paper argues that exploring the influence that multi-disciplinary cultural intermediaries may have in a transforming society such as Johannesburg, South Africa can provide insight regarding use of the circuit of culture, and communication for transformation, in communication across cultures.

2. Culture-centred approach to public relations

A culture-centred approach moves away from the view of public relations as a service to organisations with an emphasis on distributing high volumes of information and pre-determined standards of practice and quality. Instead, it moves towards efforts aimed at creating meaning through relationships (Ledingham, 2009). Within such a view, focus is placed on quality and meaningful engagements with stakeholders, interactions are influenced by cultural settings, and the products of these interactions must be culturally sensitive (Ledingham, 2009, p. 226). Macnamara and Crawford (2013) identify the key role that cultural factors such as social values and temporal context play in maintaining and shaping culture, and further call for inclusiveness and an understanding of the dynamic, localised nature of public communication activities labelled as public relations. Culture is seen as key to knowledge creation, perceptions, shared meaning and behavioural change (Dutta et al., 2012).

A culture-centred approach focuses on contextual meaning and theorisation from below, thus providing marginalised individuals with opportunities to actively contribute to the creation of meaning through discourse (Dutta et al., 2012). Hodges (2006) further argues that, in the process of communication, public relations introduces its audiences to new ideas, concepts and practices thus playing an active role in shaping culture and identity. Curtin and Gaither (2005) place contested identities, relational differences and the primacy of power as central to the meaning making practice of public relations. Investigations into power and the control of public relations practices come into play when using a culture-centred approach; such an approach allows for the description of practices as they are, and not as theorists think they should be, thus contributing to the development of much-needed critical and alternative approaches (Dutta et al., 2012; p. 2). Both practitioner and researcher are seen as producers of knowledge. This is based on the recognition of contextual meanings and the development of theory from below, from the contribution of those actively working as cultural intermediaries. A culture-centred approach can be

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