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Power struggles: A sociological approach to activist communication

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an alternative approach to the scholarship of activist public relations, based on the ideas of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu; notably his understanding of activism in society. Although Bourdieu is one of the most quoted sociologists in the world (Santoro, 2011; Truong & Weill, 2012), his work has only received limited attention in public relations, and has been entirely ignored within the context of activist communication. This is despite his focus on power, relationships and the role of activists in modern democracies, all of which are central themes in public relations practice and research. Based on Bourdieu's theory of practice, the discipline's prevailing, dominant, industry serving, functionalist paradigm positions public relations' role in society as to perpetuate social inequalities. However, drawing on his ideas leads us to question if public relations skills could be equally utilized to challenge existing power imbalances in society, either in support or on behalf of those groups and individuals whose voices have been drowned out by traditional public relations efforts. The author argues that Bourdieu was not only an accomplished scholar, but also an activist in his own right. It is this combination of personal experience with academic ideas that lends weight to his scholarly work through which he urged the scholarly community to utilize their skills, knowledge and research to challenge (perceived) inequalities in society. The emergence of this type of *activist academic*, committed to giving voice to multiple coexisting, sometimes directly competing points of views, would arguably further justify and strengthen the existence of public relations as a scholarly discipline in its own right.

1. Introduction

Activism represents a prominent body of knowledge in public relations scholarship and practice, which is largely due to the fact that activist communication and the evolution of the field of public relations are inherently intertwined (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, 2012a, 2012b). However, insights have been largely limited to the corporate perspective, motivated by a focus on issues management and damage limitation (see e.g. Deegan, 2001; Grunig, 1992; Turner, 2007; Werder, 2006), driven by the need to 'detect' and 'eliminate' potential opposition to corporate goals. Furthermore, much of the PR research agenda into activism has been based on conceptual papers (e.g. Derville, 2005; Dhir, 2007; Karagianni & Cornelissen, 2006) and retrospective analysis of secondary data, such as media coverage and campaign materials (e.g. Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Demetrius, 2001; Gueterbock, 2004; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Stokes & Rubin, 2010; Weaver, 2010).

Significantly, scholarly and practitioner literature have largely failed to consider non-commercial communicators and in particular grassroots activists, who are fundamentally different to the well-established, international NGOs, such as Greenpeace (see e.g. Cooper, 2009; Gueterbock, 2004; Heath, 1998; Roper, 2005) and the Sierra Club (Grunig, 1989; Reber & Berger, 2005; Reber,

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Petersone, & Berger, 2010), which have been the focus of the activism PR research agenda to date.¹ The latter typically have the economic resources to draw on the expertise of dedicated, in-house communication staff and outside specialists or consultants. Consequently, international NGOs' structure, communication expertise and management style resemble more closely those of the corporations who practices they may oppose, than collectives, social movements and grassroots organizations (Demetriou, 2001; Jaques, 2006). In fact, this resemblance with familiar structures and communication styles may (subconsciously) influence researchers' choice in study subjects.

Overall, there appears to be a lack of insight into activist communication from the activist perspective, resulting in a very limited, one-sided understanding of the concept. This paper proposes the extension of the sociology of Bourdieu's theory of practice to analyze activist communication in order to gain a more realistic insight into how activists position themselves in what Bourdieu refers to as fields of struggle, to ensure their voice is being heard. The focus of this paper is on Bourdieu's theoretical ideas in relation to activism and power, which may inspire future applied (case) studies.

2. Activist communication in public relations scholarship

Commonly referenced definitions of activists (see e.g. Holtzhausen, 2007) and activist groups (see e.g. Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) are suitably broad to encompass a range of organizations, from international NGOs and not-for profit organizations, to community groups and context-driven social movements, thereby indirectly implying that despite vast differences in structures, resources and capabilities, these entities are comparable and can be studied in a similar way. The implied monolithic activist concept fails to recognize the variety in structures, activities, communication styles and sources of capital.

The notion of power is a key theme in research into activist communication. Researchers have shown that activists strive to challenge the status quo in competition with corporate entities and government departments that are typically considerably better resourced. Public relations scholars have suggested a number of power equalizers that may aid activists in their 'quest' to ensure their voice is being heard; most notably by recommending the use of traditional media (e.g. García, 2011; Grunig, 1992) and new technologies (e.g. Bray, 1998; Bunting & Lipski, 2001; Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998; Jaques, 2006; Mazzini, 2004). However, such recommendations are rarely based on research that includes the activist perspective. The literature has therefore concentrated on power disparities in relation to economic wealth, suggesting that activists lack economic capital as well as, to a lesser extent, human resources (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000) and specialist skills (e.g. Stein, 2009).

The critical PR scholar Holtzhausen (2007) concludes that despite its prominent role in activism, power remains under-theorized in the public relations literature. In spite of the emergence of an increased focus on 'critical scholarship', this 'gap' has only gradually been addressed (e.g. Dutta, 2009, 2011, 2013; Dutta & Pal, 2010; Edwards, 2011; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Weaver, 2001; Weaver, Motion, & Roper, 2006).²

3. The central role of power

The notion of power is central to Bourdieu's work. In publications such as *Acts of Resistance* (Bourdieu, 1998a), *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu & Accardo, 1999) and *Political Interventions: Social Science and Political Action* (Bourdieu, Poupeau, & Discepolo, 2008), he repeatedly highlights power struggles between the resource-rich and underrepresented members of society. Bourdieu defines society as a social space that is marked by a constant struggle for influence, in which actors battle against each other in an effort to secure resources in order to further their own interest (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Accardo, 1999; Grenfell, 2008; Honneth, Kocyba, & Schwibs, 1986). His public actions during the later stages of his career were characterized by his use of colorful language and analogies with battle fields and "power games" (Bourdieu et al., 2008), thereby drawing attention to what he considered was intrinsic to the activist core—that is, conflict and the absence of a "zone of compromise" (see e.g. Stokes & Rubin, 2010) or mutual benefits, which are frequently referred to as best or excellent practice in PR activism literature (e.g. Grunig & Grunig, 1997; Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Compromise, cooperation or even collaboration with corporations may be a popular strategic consideration for established, international NGOs, such as for example the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). However, from a grassroots activist perspective the notion of a common ground is frequently unrealistic and undesirable (Stokes & Rubin, 2010; Weaver, 2010). The concept of balanced, two-way communication as championed in the extant literature essentially ignores the unequal distribution of power between activists and organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Jones, 2002), which is usually in favor of the commercial entity,

Recognizing the multitude of perspectives and motives in any given society, Bourdieu called on the scholarly community to "relinquish the single, central, dominant, in a word, quasi-divine, point of view that is all too easily adopted by observers", instead encouraging his peers to "correspond to the multiplicity of coexisting, and sometimes directly competing, points of view" (Bourdieu & Accardo, 1993, p. 3; engl. translation published in 1999 Bourdieu and Accardo, 1993). This is something PR scholarship and particularly research into activism has to date largely neglected, due to the disciplines' predominantly corporation-centric research agenda. Most notably, Bourdieu does not solely theorize about the unequal distribution of power in society. Instead, he extends the idea of capital to all forms of power, "whether they be material, cultural, social or symbolic" (Swartz, 1997, p. 73). He therefore

¹ Reber et al. (2010) refer to the Sierra Club as "practising grassroots activism", however, the Sierra Club is in fact one of North America's oldest and largest environmental organizations.

² The online journal PRISM also published a special issue on power in 2012, titled "Exploring power and public relations" (Volume 9, issue 2), <http://www.prismjournal.org/power.html>.

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