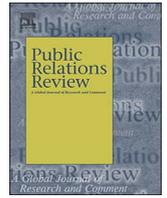




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Full Length Article

## Engagement in public relations discipline: Themes, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Engagement  
Public relations discipline  
Functionalism  
Socio-cultural turn  
Scholarly themes  
Methodology

## ABSTRACT

Several practitioners and experts in the field of public relations have emphasized the importance of public engagement in the context of new technological and social developments and the impact this has on reshaping and reconceptualising public relations. While the practice is embracing new trends, the questions of understanding, explaining and managing engagement of different publics appear to be largely unexplored in public relations discipline. The purpose of this study is to examine the state of public engagement studies in public relations scholarship in terms of themes, contexts, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. The study conducted content analysis of 59 journal articles on public engagement published in the last decade in *Journal of Communication Management*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Inquiry* and *Public Relations Review*. The results indicate that scarce studies on public engagement tend to be mostly concerned with social media and online engagement, studied from management/functional and relational perspectives, focussed on organizations, anchored in western traditions and dominated by quantitative methodology. This indicates that public engagement tends to be conceptualized as a phenomenon that organizations need to “manage” to advance their interests rather than to understand in terms of dynamics, connectedness, participation, dialogue, and interactions with publics. It is strongly influenced by post-positivism with some encouraging evidence of paradigmatic turn towards socio-cultural and critical approaches.

## 1. Introduction

Several practitioners and experts in the field of public relations have emphasized the increasing importance of engagement in the context of new technological and social developments (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016; Johnston, 2014). Indeed, “BledCom 2016 Call for Papers” (2016) opened with the following:

In 2008, Richard Edelman, president and CEO of Edelman, the largest independent public relations agency in the world, stated that public engagement is the future of public relations. Eight years later, how much of that future has come to life?

There are strong indicators that engagement has emerged as an important concept with a high potential to reshape and reconceptualize public relations (Kang, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014). As “stakeholders challenge the discourse of organizational primacy and organizations prioritize the need for authentic stakeholder involvement” (Johnston, 2014, p.381), building culture and cultivating engagement became one of the central tasks of public relations. The importance of engagement has been further enhanced by technological development of digital media, especially social media, which provide seemingly unlimited opportunities for publics

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.04.002>

Received 15 October 2016; Accepted 9 April 2017

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to become engaged with organizations, content and each other (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). In increasingly participatory culture, publics expect to collaborate with organizations and take an active role in communication and co-production of meaning. As such, engagement has been recognized as a critical foundation of organizational success in the formation of relationships with their publics, as well as for public relations to contribute to a fully functioning society (de Bussy, 2010; Heath, 2006).

While the practice is embracing engagement as a crucial driver of change, it tends to be under-researched, undertheorized and inadequately addressed in public relations scholarship (de Bussy, 2010; Devin & Lane, 2014; Welch, 2011). Several questions, including the questions of definitions and meaning of engagement; understanding, explaining and managing engagement of different publics (e.g. employees, communities, media, consumers, activists); reasons and motives for people's engagement as well as disengagement; digital engagement; grassroots democracy; institutional response; as well as ways, in which individuals and groups can use the new technologies to communicate their concerns about different organisations and to mobilise others to action, still appear to be largely unexplored in public relations scholarship. This lack of attention to publics, social dynamics and culture can be seen as symptomatic of general trends in public relations discipline, which has until recently been dominated by functionalist paradigm and normative theories with a focus on organizational communication, public relations profession and how it can benefit organizations (Edwards, 2016; Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006). Over the past 15 years these have been importantly challenged by the socio-cultural turn, shifting "the ontological and epistemological focus of the field towards socially constructed nature of practice, process and outcomes" (Edwards & Hodges, 2011, p.3), yet there is a question to what extent these shifts redirected scholarly attention from (powerful) organizations to publics and public engagement.

The purpose of this study is to examine what is the state of public engagement studies in public relations scholarship in terms of themes, contexts, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. By combining all these areas, the study represents one of the first attempts at providing a comprehensive overview of trends in engagement research. Content analysis of academic articles on engagement published over the last decade in key public relations journals was conducted. Besides looking at the state of engagement studies, this paper is also seeking to establish if the studies of engagement have embraced and/or enhanced a paradigmatic shift in the field of public relations from traditionally organization-focussed functionalism to socio-cultural and critical approaches. Given the nature of the public engagement with a primary focus on stakeholders' and publics' role in organizational communication, such shift would not only be welcome, but also expected.

## 2. Engagement in public relations scholarship

Engagement first appeared as a theoretical concept in public relations literature in the 1990s with early studies focusing on cognitive involvement in campaigns and community capacity building (Johnston, 2014). More than two decades after and enhanced by new technological and social developments, engagement is considered as a "game-changer" and underpins much of the relational and public communication research with growing literature, special journal issues, edited volumes and conferences dedicated exclusively to this topic. According to Hutchins and Tindall (2016), high-engagement publics fundamentally challenge traditional public relations theoretical assumptions and models, including the situational theory of publics, and redefine the purpose and practice of public relations. In a similar manner, Johnston (2014) heralded engagement "as a new paradigm for public relations in the 21st century [...], challenging and contributing to the zeitgeist of public relations functionalist, instrumentalist, and critical foundations." (p.381) However, de Bussy (2010) observes that albeit engaging with stakeholders should be one of the most important theoretical concepts of public relations, the fundamental issues, including the definitions and operationalization of engagement as well as the reevaluation of traditional public relations models remain largely unexplored. Public relations scholarship has most often discussed the possibilities of engagement using social media, but even in this area research has not truly explained how exactly engagement is created or the outcomes and effects it has on Organization-Public Relationships (OPRs) (Saxton & Waters, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

### 2.1. Definitions and conceptualizations of engagement

Albeit widely and regularly used in public relations literature, engagement is rarely defined or clearly operationalized (Devin & Lane, 2014; Kang, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014). The concept tends to be treated vaguely, surrounded by confusion and used inconsistently (sometimes as a synonym for interaction, commitment, involvement, participation, relationships, dialogue, two-way or even one-way communication). Curtin (2012) relates such confusions to rare acknowledgement of paradigmatic and philosophical assumptions underpinning scholarly work in inherently multi-paradigmatic public relations field, resulting in what Kuhn (1996) called *semantic incommensurability*. This implies that engagement acquires different meanings in post-positivist (e.g. as an essentialists and measurable concept), postmodern (e.g. as a fluid notion constructed through discourse), constructivist (e.g. as a socially constructed activity and what it means to convey culture) and critical (e.g. as reinforcing or undermining power structures) paradigms. If we additionally accept public relations as a global field with diverse cultural meanings and add *cultural incommensurability* to Kuhn's semantic one, then an agreement on unified definition and meaning is simply impossible (Curtin, 2012).

In the area of public relations, there are various debates on fundamental nature of engagement. Devin and Lane (2014) define engagement "as a psychologically motivated affective state that brings voluntary extra-role behaviors, and is characterized by affective commitment, positive affectivity and empowerment that an individual public experiences in interactions with an organization over time." (p.402) Taylor and Kent (2014), on the other hand, position engagement within dialogue theory and conceptualize it as a "part of dialogue and through engagement, organizations and publics can make decisions that create social capital. Engagement is both an orientation that influences interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions

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