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Divided we stand: Defying hegemony in global public relations theory and practice?

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Abstract

The last decade has seen the world becoming increasingly complex. One way of dealing with complexity, according to Schwab (2010a), is to look for certainties or solutions that impose order by simplifying. The authors contend that this is a risk in public relations practice and the academy. While recognizing their benefits they warn against attempts to produce global models which also seek to impose hegemony and argue for maintaining a diversity that reflects reality. They take the cases of the UK and Singapore as respective exemplars where hegemony has arguably occurred and where it can still be resisted. They call for a professional and epistemological stand against hegemony.

Keywords: Complexity, Hegemony, Globalization, Excellence, UK, Singapore

1. Introduction

In the last decade the world has changed radically. According to Klaus Schwab, Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum (Schwab, 2010a) the five drivers of time compression, complexity, interdependence, interconnectivity of issues and shifts in power from the west to the east and from the north to the south, drive the changes of world society today. The issues they generate have far surpassed governments' or organizations' ability to cope and as a consequence, one response, Schwab contends, has been to reduce complexity by searching for new certainties or solutions that impose order and certainty by simplifying. In practice this means, according to the authors of this paper, accepting and in some cases enforcing convergence: commonalities and standards that cut across time, space and culture, like global accounting standards, legal practices, and behemoth social media platforms. It is, of course, wrong to imply that all global initiatives of this kind are reprehensible. Global accounting standards seek not only to establish the basis for minimum standards, but facilitate international exchange of information that has for legal and governance purposes to be of a universal nature. Enterprises such as the UN Global Compact have sought to establish minimum working standards and human rights in the workplace which are laudable in a situation where some minorities (including women) are disadvantaged.

In the profession of public relations, the tendency toward convergence is exemplified by moves by global or globally-affiliated agencies and consultancies to standardize and promote their own campaigning principles, and by multinational organizations that are consolidating, for example, their global issues management practices. Global initiatives by the professional bodies acting in consort, such as The Stockholm Accords (Global Alliance, 2013a) and the Melbourne Mandate (Global Alliance, 2013b), too can be interpreted as both standard-setting, but also consolidation and simplification attempts.

Theory development in public relations has gone down a parallel path, by devising convergent models (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009) and applying them either regionally, as in the European Model of public relations (van Ruler and Vercic, 2002 and van Ruler et al., 2004) or world-wide through the theory of generic principles and specific applications (Vercic et al., 1996 and Grunig, 2009). These models have recognized limitations. For example the authors of the European model acknowledge the complexity and divergence of practice throughout Europe and accept that their attempt to define a distinctly European approach to the practice as being limited to identifying a series of 'characteristics' which more or less describe the practice. Certainly practitioners in the United Kingdom (UK) would find difficulty in choosing between whether their practice is more 'European' or more 'American' in orientation (Gregory, 2011a).

A prior question concerns the necessity or desirability of any regional or global model. As Tavis (2000) states, practitioners determine locally how to balance between the divergence of local needs and the convergence required by global organizations. Convergent models may help practitioners who work in the increasingly global world of public relations and in multiple contexts to categorize and analyze public relations and make their working lives simpler. However, the same models may also lead to double-binds for practitioners when global (very often 'western') norms clash with local ones. At the same time, convergent theoretical models can become irrelevant for practitioners who do not recognize their complex, daily practice in them.

This paper, while recognizing the legitimate search for commonalities and the attempt to set benchmarks and standards (although the question has to be asked, whose standards?), challenges the search for global public relations models and calls for a scholarship and a practice that embraces divergence and resists the temptation to converge, simplify and generalize. In doing so, it asserts that diversity will be a mark of both strength and a reflection of reality as the practice of public relations develops around the world. This paper discusses first and in brief, issues around hegemony and globalization; second, it looks at the success of hegemony in the UK as it has arguably succeeded to US practice with the resultant loss of heritage and richness this has brought. Thirdly, it looks at the pressures toward hegemony in Singapore, but calls for resistance against it; and finally it calls for an overall professional and epistemological stand against hegemony.

2. Explanations and explorations of hegemony and globalization

The words 'hegemony' and 'globalization' are multi-faceted concepts open to a multiplicity of interpretations; therefore in this section of the paper the authors will briefly explain and explore these notions.

2.1. Hegemony

In its original conceptualization, hegemony referred to the way an imperial power (the hegemon or leader state) ruled its geopolitical subordinates by the threat of force and implied power rather than by direct military rule (Hassing, 1994). It originated in ancient Greece where the city-state of Athens exercised dominance over other city states. The concept developed in the 19th century to include cultural predominance and can be seen in its fullest form when the European powers attempted to assert their hegemony on Asia and Africa in particular.

However it was Gramsci, 1971 and Howson and Smith, 2008) who elaborated and promoted a more sophisticated version of cultural hegemony. His assertion was that the dominant classes present their view of reality in such a way that it is the only sensible way of seeing things and is therefore accepted as common sense by other classes. Thereby they gain consent for their world-view. Gramsci (1971) claimed that the dominant classes exercised power in a range of spheres, including the economic, political and cultural, but also and crucially, that this extended to the state and civil society. It was in these spheres that hegemony was created and maintained. Clark (1977) defines hegemony as "how the ruling classes control the media and education", a narrow, but not untypical definition. Roper (2005) elaborates further:

Hegemony can be defined as domination without physical coercion through the widespread acceptance of particular ideologies and consent to the practices associated with those ideologies (p. 70).

Quoting Bocoock, Roper goes on to say that hegemony includes the notion of “moral and philosophical leadership” (Bocoock, 1986, p. 11). This leadership is not achieved through democratic processes, but via the manufacturing of consent. It is a case of there not being a sensible alternative world-view. It would be wrong however, to view hegemony as a static concept. It can be challenged, but difficult to unseat because it is the ‘common sense’ of the particular discourses under consideration.

In public relations therefore, Excellence Theory, being the accepted dominant theory of the public relations sphere (Botan & Hazleton, 2009, p. 8), proved difficult to challenge until relatively recently (L’Etang and Pieczka, 2006 and Roper, 2005). In the practice, the dominance of the large consultancies has brought ways of working and particular practices which are ubiquitous and difficult to challenge (more on this below).

2.2. Globalization

Globalization is a multi-dimensional concept. It is a political, economic, technical, and, more importantly for this paper, a deeply cultural phenomenon that

is marked by the complex diffusion of ideas, information, capital and people across national boundaries, entangling the local and global, deterritorialising and re-territorialising national cultures. (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 2000, cited in Pal & Dutta, 2008, p.159).

As Ghemawat (2007) points out, the concept of globalization – and its cruder version of a flat earth – is in itself a hegemonic metaphor that disregards that “differences still matter”. His data reveal how the globalizing process is neither linear, nor all-encompassing and at most deserves to be called semi-globalization. The increase in some – but not all – cross-border interactions makes differences not less important, but instead more vivid. Precisely because markets are not fully globally integrated (but retain, among other things, cultural differences) organizations are constantly exposed to the co-terminus pressures of divergence and convergence. As Castells (1998, p. 9) describes: “Globalization proceeds selectively, including and excluding segments of economies”. Hence, globalization is foremost a process of increasing complexity masked behind a term suggesting simple linearity. The authors of this paper see direct similarities between globalization and colonization in that the later followed a process whereby those countries being colonized went through change based on rules, structures, systems, language and (at least on the surface) cultural norms that were recognizably of the colonizer, yet applied and experienced differently depending on local conditions. (See the 19th century version of hegemony mentioned in Section 2.1.)

The complexities involved in globalization have become more evident in recent years. Until as recently as 2009, globalization could be simplified as the spread of cross-border interactions from the center to the global peripheries, gradually shifting the latter to the (mostly economic) center. In the past, the largest part of international trade by the ‘west’ was done with other ‘western’ countries; meanwhile, the largest part of international trade by all the other regions was equally done with the ‘west’. This has changed radically: particularly Asia (but also South and Central America) no longer conducts the largest share of its international trade with the countries of the ‘west’ (World Trade Organization, 2012). In the process, ‘western’ modernity has ceased to be a universalizing ideology and is no longer the driving force behind the imperatives of a global commercial economy and international trade. Other ideological drivers of economic growth, like ‘Confucian Dynamism’ (Hofstede & Harris Bond, 1988), have been (re-)discovered instead.

The second simplification often falsely implied by the term globalization is that today's world is spaceless or de-territorial, with the (digital and virtual) flow of people, information, matter and capital overshadowing space and identities related to locality. Localized responses have – if at all – been framed not as an integral part of globalization, but as disruptions of a linear, spaceless process (Nash, 2001). Globalization-as-complexity hence challenges a number of the seminal contributions that have been made in the field of culture and public relations.

In spite of the complexity and divergence behind globalization, the ‘Excellence Study’ (Grunig, Grunig, & Vercic, 1998, Grunig et al., 2006 and Grunig and Grunig, 2008) has remained the hegemonic “disciplinary matrix, [...] probably the only one in public relations” (Botan & Hazleton, 2009, p. 8). This matrix could be argued as being emic in approach, attempting to take themes and constructs developed in one culture (largely American) and adapting them for use within others. However, it could be argued as being etic in the implicit assumption that these principles are universal and offer shared frames of reference across diverse populations. Critical scholars like Pieczka (2006) lament the simplification inherent in the application of the ‘Excellence Matrix’ as a universal discourse, rather than as a specific model. Its metatheoretical all-inclusive approach lends itself to normative proselytizing, making

perfect and profound sense to the converted, but appear[ing] problematic to those who operate outside them [...] This is rather reminiscent of Victorian missionaries explaining savages’ habits walking about naked” (Pieczka, 2006, p. 355).

For the ‘Excellence Study’ to be justifiably and globally etic ‘*ceteris paribus*’ (all things being equal) needs to be assumed, particularly regarding the pluralism in societies that public relations operates in: symmetry and two-way dialog are closely linked with the notion that power is distributed and exercised between multiple groups that together and in the long run aspire and achieve equilibrium (Demetrious, 2006). Pluralism of this kind is however an almost uniquely ‘western’ norm. Critical scholars therefore contend that assuming ‘*ceteris paribus*’ and not incorporating greater diversity will firstly, decrease the understanding of the profession as it expands globally while its audiences continue to fragment (Banks, 2000 and Edwards, 2011). These scholars argue secondly, that operating on the basis of ‘*ceteris paribus*’ will damage the ability of public relations to enable understanding and equilibrium (Botan, 1992). Indeed, the very notion of what constitutes a ‘public’ in a multi-local world (Pal & Dutta, 2008) compounded by the ethnocentricity of public relations theory, practice and teaching (Choi and Cameron, 2005, Sriramesh, 2002 and Sriramesh, 2009), point to the need for a more critical reflection on public relations and its role. Consequently critical scholars posit that communication must be “interpreted within the cultural contexts of recipients, not sources” (Banks, 2000, p. 39).

The ‘Excellence Matrix’ has inspired numerous studies that are either comparative or that distinguish the generic principles of ‘Excellence’ from its specific applications¹ (Coombs et al., 1994, Vercic et al., 1996 and Sriramesh and Vercic, 2009) and integrate cultural and other contextual variables (Sriramesh, 2004, Sriramesh, 2006, Sriramesh, 2008 and Sriramesh, 2009). But even these studies, its critics say, reinforce hegemony as least as much as they challenge it, by accepting the ‘Excellence Matrix’ and its ‘western’ context of pluralism as reference points, thereby rendering other forms of public relations as different or peripheral (Edwards, 2011 and McKie and Munshi, 2005). Critical scholars also contend that mainstream public relations scholars (by erroneously assuming universal pluralism and opportunity for dialog) downplay and thus perpetuate the hegemony of corporations over their environment and of ‘western’ forms of corporate capitalism over other parts of the global economy (Leitch and Neilson, 1996, L’Etang and Pieczka, 1996, L’Etang and Pieczka, 2006 and Munshi and Kurian, 2005). The meaning of symmetry thus becomes inverted because it serves hegemony which “is constantly challenged [...] and the only way it can be maintained is through the making of concessions at key areas of contestation” (Roper, 2005, p. 70).

Postmodern scholars too seek to deconstruct the dominance of the corporation and the allegedly rational process of managing its relations with communities. Instead, communities who are otherwise marginalized or ‘different’ on the basis of their history, culture, class, gender, locality, etc., become the focus of interpretive analysis. The

¹ The generic principles are: involvement of public relations in strategic management; empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition; integrated public relations function; public relations as a separate management function; role of the public relations practitioner; two-way symmetrical model of public relations; symmetrical system of internal communication; professionals trained in modern public relations; and, diverse organizational role structure (Vercic et al., 1996, pp. 37–40). The specific applications are: infrastructure (political, economic and level of activism); culture; and, media system (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009, pp. 1–19).

result will be not one central public relations theory, postmodern scholars predict, but multiple truths (Hatch, 1997, Holtzhausen, 2000, Holtzhausen, 2002 and Pompper, 2005).

Wakefield notes that in the practice hegemonizing tendencies are also prevalent. He states (1996):

Many multinationals transfer their own philosophies and personnel into new territories to conduct public relations in their traditional way. (p. 17).

Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction, consultancies are assisting the drive to hegemony by standardizing their approaches and practices irrespective of the cultures in which they operate, and it is little comfort to know that public relations is not alone in these moves. As recently opined in the Financial Times

[t]he US role in the global corporate economy consists disproportionately of consultants, designers, managers et al., who make a good living showing foreign leaders how to organise their businesses and societies along US lines. (Caldwell, 2012)

This standardization could be seen as an extension of hegemony over different spheres.

The authors of this paper contend that public relations both as a practice and an academic discipline needs a more thorough integration of the diverse local to do justice to globalization, as shown by Toledano (2005) for Israel and Somerville, Purcell, & Morrison (2011) for Northern Ireland. We seek to undertake this comparatively for the UK and Singapore. As proposed by Sassen (2006), an analytical incorporation of the local into the global entails

a partial rejection of the notion that local scales are inevitably part of nested hierarchies of scale running from the local to the regional, the national and the international. Localities or local practices can constitute multi-scalar systems, operating across scales and not merely scaling upward because of new communication capabilities. (p. 61)

3. Pressures to global hegemony in the UK and Singapore

3.1. The UK

Many public relations texts refer to the Anglo-American paradigms of theory and practice as dominant (van Ruler et al., 2004, Skinner et al., 2004 and Sriramesh, 2009). This carries an implication that there is a similarity of approach between America (US) and the UK. However, the modern history of public relations in the UK has a very different provenance from that of the US which has been driven largely from the corporate sector. As far back as 1809 the UK Government's treasury department employed a press spokesman and the post office (a public sector body) published what might be regarded as the first annual report in 1854. These origins in the public sector are harbingers of the development of public relations in the UK in the 20th Century. Unlike the US, the UK saw the growth and professionalization of modern public relations emerge largely from the public sector. Indeed it was a group of public relations officers from within local government that provided the impetus behind the establishment of the UK Institute of Public Relations (IPR) in 1948. Furthermore, largely because of its historic roots, the orientation of public relations in the UK has traditionally been toward promoting the public interest rather than private (that is, corporate) interests and was always much broader in conception than in the US with its emphasis on media relations. In the UK the primary purpose of public relations prior to the 1980s was to build communities where citizens could hold government to account and where they in turn understood their rights and responsibilities (Ogilvy-Webb, 1965). It was not until the 1980s (Edwards, 2009) that corporate public relations departments and public relations consultancies became established in the UK.

Since the 1980s, however, the corporate sector has grown significantly in size in the UK (Gregory, 2011b) and there has been a distinct 'turn' toward the 'American Model' (Ewen, 1996 and Miller and Dinan, 2008). The presence of large and influential US consultancies (e.g., Burson-Marsteller, Hill and Knowlton, Edelman and

Fleishman-Hillard) meant an inevitable importation of US consultancy practices. Mirroring practice in the US, heavy advocacy campaigns have been conducted by consultancies for large organizations. The burgeoning in-house public relations departments (Gregory, 2011b), many of whom have employed consultancies embracing US-style practices, have in turn been influenced. Other in-house practitioners have looked to corporate America for operational models to emulate, given the longevity of the practice in the US.

In parallel to these developments, the more neutral stance of the public sector has been challenged in recent years. The sector has traditionally seen its role as providing “clear, truthful and factual information to citizens” (House of Lords Communications Committee, 2009, p. 7). However, the Labor government headed by Tony Blair and the current Coalition Government have been significantly influenced by American political communicators as evidenced by the numbers advising political parties in the UK. A 2004 investigation into Government communications approved by Tony Blair and headed by Robert Phillis (Phillis, 2004), recommended taking more note of what was regarded as best practice from the private sector, and encouraged civil servants to spend time in the private sector to learn from them (and incidentally, the reverse). For the first time in a public document of such a nature, UK citizens were also referred to as ‘customers’. Moreover, it is notable that UK Government communication has seen an increasing shift in emphasis onto campaigning for policies and for programs aimed at behavior change (Cabinet Office, 2011). This overtly corporatist approach to public relations is deeply redolent of an earlier history in the US (Edwards, 2009 and Olasky, 1987) and can be cogently argued as the ‘Americanization’ of UK public relations. It is important to acknowledge differences between the UK and the US too. In Government communication and public sector communication more generally in the UK, ‘social marketing’ appears to have taken a stronger grip. This in itself could be seen as the application of private sector marketing principles, developed in the US (the acknowledged founding text on social marketing is that by Kotler & Zaltman, 1971), to the public sector and supports the argument of the authors. This ‘drift’ toward private sector practices, while undoubtedly successful in that it is apparently becoming the norm, is also deeply problematic. The change in the orientation of practice in the public sector partly explains why public relations attracts on-going and significant criticism as being ‘in the pocket’ of business and as being more concerned with serving private rather than public interests (Miller & Dinan, 2008). In accepting the corporatist, American model of practice, the UK denies its own very specific public relations history, a national culture that is more collectivist and statist than the US and a view that public relations should serve the public interest above all else. It appears a willing, reverse colonization has taken place that replaced a unique country-based public relations identity with a particular orientation and practice purpose.

In acknowledging this, the academy in the UK also has to take its share of responsibility. Public relations education in the UK lagged behind developments in the US, with the first courses being launched at the Universities of Stirling, Bournemouth and Leeds Metropolitan at the very end of the 1990s. Students, many of whom are now in senior positions in the profession, were taught largely from US textbooks because there were few UK-written texts in existence. Excellence theory was taught as staple and American models of practice as conducted by the large consultancies and corporate organizations, held up as exemplars. While there was a large and vibrant public sector public relations community, there was less written or studied about it. Again, it is true to acknowledge that more recently, the critical school in particular, and other theoretical stances such as post-modernism and the sociological perspective have been more well represented in public relations education and there have been an increasing number of texts emanating from the UK. However, in Universities and colleges where public relations is taught as part of or in combination with marketing, or is taught by those with a background in marketing, there is ample anecdotal evidence that where public relations theory is taught at all, it is predominantly Excellence Theory. On reflection it can be argued that because there was little by way of proposal of or defense for a UK model of practice, and little theorizing about it, the academy implicitly colluded in the Americanization of UK practice. Ironically, this was probably exacerbated by the emergence of the critical school in the UK, who while critiquing much US scholarship, particularly the Grunigian paradigm, had no consistent alternative to suggest that the practice could adopt.

Having looked at the UK, where it can be cogently argued that US hegemony has triumphed, the authors now turn to a discussion of public relations in Singapore, where the development of practice and theory is rather different and where there is still the opportunity to develop a country model that is unique and particular.

3.2. Singapore

The lack of research activity and theoretical models about public relations in Asia is well known and lamented by leading scholars in the field (Sriramesh, 2004 and Sriramesh et al., 1999). Contextual and cultural variables have started to enter empirical research (Sriramesh et al., 1996, Huang, 2000 and Lim et al., 2005), but virtually no progress has been made in conceptually linking these applications to public relations in Asia and hence no models of Asian public relations have evolved. For Singapore, a mature economy regularly ranked as Asia's most competitive and globalized, even fewer such studies exist (Yeap, 1994, Tan, 2001, Chay-Nemeth, 2003 and Lim et al., 2005). Here lies an opportunity (already lost in the UK) to resist hegemony and create an indigenous model. Such an opportunity also exists for other countries in a similar position.

The authors contend that it will never be possible to develop an indigenous a model if the Excellence Study remains the hegemonic starting point. It is not just its etic nature that gets in the way, but its very methodology. Empiricism (in itself a hegemonic approach) firstly restricts public relations research to ever more finely granulated measurable variables and thus to a microscopic perspective. Secondly, – with its deductive process of transferring aggregate models to specific situations in order to test them – empiricism relies on the hierarchies of scale that were criticized by Sassen (2006) in the second section of this paper. Empiricism standardly presupposes that the local is a specific testing ground of the global. Thirdly, and most importantly, empiricism forces researchers to apply observational terms. Hence societies will remain inexplicable if they differ from the 'western' societies of the Excellence Study because certain conditions are absent. Singapore counts as the most emblematic global city, probably because it still lacks many of the visible contradictions of internationalization of trade and capital: its marginalized and disadvantaged parts of the population are barely perceptible. Crucially, Singapore also lacks two phenomena that are key premises of the Excellence Study: competitive pluralism and an independent media system. For cultural and historical reasons best described in the GLOBE-study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), the city-state (like all societies in the 'Confucian cluster') does not embrace pluralism as a collectively beneficial concept. Singapore - a country that has evolved from third-world status to one of the richest nations on earth - seems a challenge to the notion that economic development and civic pluralism go hand-in-hand and has instead evolved into a best-case example for those that argue that pluralism can wait (Verweij and Pelizzo, 2009 and Kaplan, 2003). Its economic transformation has been achieved by a regularly re-elected and widely supported one-party government that sets the agenda in most aspects of society. As a former leading civil servant wonders,

Is it to be Sparta, a martial, well-organised, efficient society [...] or an Athens, untidy, chaotic and argumentative, but which survived because of its diversity of thinking? (Tay, 2006, p. 26).

Equally alien to such societies is the notion that views need to publicly compete. The state instead is a necessary arbiter of competing interests and reflects the deliberated or majority view. Chong (2005, p. 284) describes it as an "absence of competition between non-state groups for political legitimacy and material resources, but also one that has little need for the application of agency". None of the Confucian societies (except Japan), nor the Southeast Asian societies have what Freedom House (Freedomhouse, 2012) considers 'full freedom' of the press, and Reporters Without Borders (Reporters without Borders, 2012) rates no Asian country's freedom of the press as 'good'. In these societies – and in Singapore particularly – the media's function is not to generate competitive discourse, but to support national development and effective governance (Lim et al., 2005). As described by Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern Singapore and its longest serving prime minister

people reading the newspapers, watching the news on TV or government websites will know this is the official position. These are the facts we are stating [...]. We're not going to put anything on the mainstream media or government websites which is untrue. (Lee, 2011, p. 87).

To understand public relations in Singapore, a hermeneutical approach is necessary and Giddens, 1984, Giddens, 1991, Giddens, 2000 and Giddens, 2002 structuration and late modernity theory is helpful (as suggested by Falkheimer, 2007 and Falkheimer, 2009, as well as Cozier & Witmer, 2001). It integrates individual micro-, and societal macro-levels of analysis by rejecting the dichotomy between agency and structure. Instead, Giddens describes how social structures are reproduced by repetitive individual acts, but also

serve as the enablers to these acts. Organizations and their environments are enabling and reproducing conditions of each other through communication, both mediated and direct.

Giddens also contends that humans have a general interpretive capacity that allows them as individuals, groups or as society to be self-conscious, to monitor their interactions and to ascribe meaning to them. To Giddens, this 'reflexivity' has evolved over time and is rooted in the individualism of society in 'late modernity'. Mediated communication is pivotal for reflexivity, as it creates symbolic spaces in which joint interpretations evolve without humans and organizations having to be in each other's presence. Public relations co-creates those joint interpretations by ritualizing an organization's involvement in society (Falkheimer, 2007 and Falkheimer, 2009).

A hermeneutic inquiry into public relations in Singapore should therefore be led by three questions:

- What dominant structure – if not pluralism – enables public relations and is, in turn, reproduced by it?
- What is the dominant symbolic space – if not professional, independent media?
- What is the stage of society's reflexivity?

The authors suggest that the following answers are necessary, albeit incomplete, components of a model of public relations in Singapore:

Effective public relations requires and sustains political power: organizations with greater resources and legitimation to dominate the actions of other parts of society are also better able to construct a shared sense and meaning. Reversely, the ability to manage an organization's relationship with society translates into greater access to the resources needed to maintain political dominance. The government plays a central role in practically all organizations' relations with Singaporean society, and is even described as the 'main stakeholder' in many public relations efforts. About half of the country's GDP is generated by multinational corporations and foreign-held companies who above all rely on the government to keep the country's infrastructure efficient, its law impartial and its taxes low.

Another main contributor to the economy are over 80 statutory boards and more than a thousand government-linked companies that – operated much more like private businesses than as bureaucracies – are resiliently successful while sustaining the role of the government in the economy (Trocki, 2003). For all of these organizations, to support the dominant coalition's agenda (in Singapore this agenda comprises growth, outstanding infrastructure and effective governance) means creating the conditions conducive for effective public relations. Their share of voice becomes as predominant as their contribution to Singapore's political economy when they "publicly align themselves with the state and its institutions in order to fulfil" joint goals and interests (Chong, 2005 and Chua, 2000). Most public relations is therefore an integral part of the national majoritarian narrative that Lee (2011) describes as follows

Will we have common space, growing ever- larger but still remaining our private different selves? I think it will take a very, very long time. So what will hold us together? I believe the economic necessity of peace and stability and growth. (p. 57)

The professional media are a formal, but no longer the dominant sense-making agent. Rather, the dominant symbolic spaces in which organizations manage their relationships are either virtual or commercial (or both). Most communication by corporations is commercial. Singapore's symbolic (and physical) spaces are advertising, advertorials and ubiquitous shopping malls, its main and most accessible public spaces. The shopping mall is a major arena for achieving individuality and social interaction for many Singaporeans who – according to a former prime-minister – consider life "not complete without shopping" (Chua, 2003). Within these spaces, the persuasive intent is overt, the topics are limited and the transactional nature of relations are accepted and permanently reproduced. Meanwhile, public relations for non-commercial organizations often circumvents the professional media in the form of events, sponsored activities, feedback sessions, meet-the-people sessions, hotlines, and is often managed by so-called 'community relations' -, not 'public relations' - officers. Currently, social media are becoming an alternative symbolic space and Singaporeans globally lead the way in online activity (Schwab, 2010, p. 310). They replace the 'expert system' of professional media with

communication that is at the same time more direct and independent of extraneous sources of power. After all, the internet “became the first medium that citizens [...] were allowed to use for mass communication without first having to secure a government license” (George, 2005, p. 907). While the beginning of this century saw the closing of alternative online spaces like the Think Center and Sintercom, examples of independent online journalism have emerged more recently, e.g. the widely popular sites The Online Citizen, Yawning Bread and Temasek Review (Kenyon, 2010).

Singapore has reached late modernity with the sharp rise of its society's reflexivity. The success of social media is an indicator of this development. Singapore society's reflexivity has been low for decades and organizations have typically managed relations with groups of individuals, rather than with self-aware groups. This is currently changing rapidly. Publics are no longer just aggregates of fans for commercial goods, but are beginning to self-consciously form around societal goals and non-commercial activities, very often online. Online groups have also formed around the focal points of collective identity, e.g. the preservation of the country's past (relating to plans to demolish an ancient graveyard), its social and ethnic composition (relating to immigration from neighboring countries), and its polity (relating to cases of corruption on middle levels of governance). Civic society groups have started to flourish using social media, e.g. AWARE (Association of Women in Research and Action), the Singapore Nature Society and the LGBT-movement ‘pink dot’. Their communication creates new, reflexive, and at times counter-majoritarian narratives in Singapore society, as these groups on the one hand engage in the majoritarian narrative when it serves their interests, but more recently have also found ways to disengage with state representatives (Chong, 2005). It is with these newly self-aware groups that organizations and corporations are cautiously expanding their relationships from a purely transactional to a broader nature, for example with Barclays and Google publicly supporting ‘pink dot’. Meanwhile, the Singapore government is adding to society's reflexivity by initiating a ‘national conversation’ about how it wants to develop and what choices it collectively needs to make, going significantly further than its earlier engagement with civil society that was chided as purely gestural and lacking substance (Lee, 2005). In the national conversation, the government invites “Singaporeans from all walks of life to participate in an inclusive national conversation that will extend across different platforms and forums, in groups large and small, both offline and online” (<https://www.oursgconversation.sg/>).

4. Discussion and conclusions

Models, matrices and mandates that attempt to categorize and simplify the complex world of practice have been promoted as a potential way forward by both the academy and practice (Vercic et al., 1996, Grunig, 2009, Sriramesh, 2009, Sriramesh and Vercic, 2009 and Global Alliance, 2012). The authors accept their utility in attempting to provide a normative way forward and in trying to establish common ground, benchmarks and standards. However, the lack of progress in analyzing public relations across cultures indicates that global models are problematic. The world is increasing in complexity and simplification does not provide an answer to the challenge Schwab (2010a) extends. Devising an all-embracing model that encompasses such complexity results in broadly-conceptualized approaches that are clearly inadequate. The current models and their underlying empiricism are rooted in ‘western’ thinking. They were, and largely remain, designed in a less complex world where ‘western’ paradigms in management and research were dominant and not for a present in which divergent views of public relations have to be considered as cultures seek to assert their own identities (Pal and Dutta, 2008 and Sriramesh, 2009). The authors of this paper call for that diversity and richness to be recognized. It is a disservice to the public relations community to seek simplifications where they need not or cannot be found. The strengthening of the academy and practice of public relations depends on an ability to embrace complexity and diversity, indeed both should champion it.

The authors do not propose to give up empirical research altogether, nor the search for - and normative implementation of - commonalities across cultures. However, the focal point should be the efficiency and efficacy with which the public relations profession is able to navigate between the local, trans-local and global as well as the academy's ability to resolve the contradictions and inconsistencies that the industry encounters while doing so. The authors propose that an epistemological and practical subsidiarity can lead the way: de-

territorial and global structures should furthermore be empirically studied and insights on them incrementally extended market by market whenever standardization promises to resolve the most inconsistencies in global practice. However, additional conceptual room needs to be made for hermeneutical and historical research, particularly if conducted by local scholars. These have the greater capacity to identify the dominant sense-making space in their locality as well as its main agent-structure connections. As a procedural rule for studying public relations in any sub-global scale, scholars should therefore adopt the least standardized perspective capable of identifying divergence. With such subsidiarity as a hyper norm, a key qualification for both scholars and practitioners becomes their ability to make the situationally correct choice between convergence and divergence.

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