

POLITICAL PUBLIC RELATIONS: ORIGINS, CHALLENGES AND APPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

When compared to corporate public relations, political public relations are still a new field of study, which nonetheless has a great development potential. This article presents a reflection on public relations in the political sphere, by remembering its conceptual grassroots and studying the challenges imposed on its practice by the new media. Grounded in the relationship management theory and in the ideal of symmetrical and dialogic communication, this article, presents possible paths for applied research in the field of political public relations.

KEYWORDS

Political public relations; relationship management; symmetrical communication; dialogue

The practical and conceptual borders of public relations have always been in contrast with other disciplines, such as marketing, management or journalism. The case of political public relations, whose field of study and action focuses on political institutions and their actors, is therefore identical. Political public relations result from the intersection of well-established fields of study within the social sciences, such as political communication, political marketing and public relations itself. But as all these disciplines focus on the actions and interactions operating in the political sphere, it is not always easy to identify their fields of study or to ascertain their identity.

Contrary to what would be expected, few bridges have been built between political marketing and public relations in discussing these professional activities. However, they share several interests. As Newman and Vercic (2002) highlight, both public relations and political marketing have a main client, they both relate to one or more groups of people, they both develop strategies around themes, and they are both based on opinion surveys. Additionally, both public relations practitioners and political consultants have been criticised in the media as being 'corruptive for the spirit of democracy' (Newman & Vercic, 2002: 2).

Within political communication and political marketing, public relations have been mostly limited to managing relations with the media (MacNair, 1999). However, if understood as communication management (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), public relations cannot be limited to a mere instrumental view of media relations. Public relations enable the development of communication, both internally, as far as intra-party communication is concerned, and externally, clearly by establishing relationships with journalists, but also

with its members, supporters and the general public. Therefore, in the political as in the business sphere, despite the relevance of media relations, the contribution of public relations to the success of organisations goes far beyond this essentially tactic function.

Similarly to what happens in the field of public relations, many studies conducted in the scope of political communication and political marketing are focused on the development of communication strategies targeted at specific publics. These are the media, as mentioned earlier, particularly in the case of public relations and political communication; and the citizens, as voters, especially in the case of political marketing. The big difference is that political public relations aim to ‘build and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals’) (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011: 8).

The emphasis on the ‘relational paradigm’ of public relations, as will be argued throughout this article, opens up new avenues for reflecting on the processes involved in (political) organisational communication in the political sphere. This article begins with a brief presentation of the historical and conceptual foundations of political public relations, which is then followed by a discussion of the dialogic possibilities highlighted by the new media environment. In the last section of this article, some directions for future research into political public relations will be suggested.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Public relations and politics have been intertwined ever since the US President Thomas Jefferson first referred to the term ‘Public Relations’, in 1807 (Davis, 2007). Cutlip, Center and Broom (2002) explain that what we currently call public relations has its origins in the American political context, which is evident in the use of techniques that have always been part of the public opinion persuasion campaigns toolbox in favour of American Presidents (2002: 103).

Edward L. Bernays, known as the ‘father of PR’, was probably the first real political consultant, by providing the foundations for modern political PR practices (Blumenthal, 1980: 12-13). In his work ‘The Engineering of Consent’ (1955), Bernays suggests some ways for the government and political leaders to gain the support of the masses accurately and effectively. He is attributed the invention, among others, of media events and indirect messages. That is, the construction of messages where opinion leaders or ordinary people endorse products or support politicians, but in news, rather than advertising format. As is highlighted by Larry Tye, Bernays viewed public relations as a collection of instruments that would assist the ‘creation of public consent’ (Tye, 2002: 96). This is a set of relationship techniques with the media that remain relevant today (e.g. press releases, briefings, meetings with journalists, or creating media events).

In addition, Edward L. Bernays advocates the relevance of promoting or manipulating ideas, values, events or people, because, in the end, by ‘crystalizing public opinion’, the *Public Relations Counsel* (a phrase coined by Bernays) would contribute to a higher

¹ ‘Crystalizing public opinion’ is the title of one of Bernays’ work, published in 1923.

telos: the social order. 'The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society', Bernays (2005: 37) argued in his 1928 work, *Propaganda*. Predictably, the support provided to public opinion manipulation mechanisms startled many of his contemporaries by drawing their attention to the political implications of mass manipulation and propaganda. Several people called him the 'professional poisoner of the public mind' or 'Young Machiavelli of Our Time' (Olasky, 1984: 6). This connotation of public relations with propaganda and manipulation was only later countered by the seminal work of Grunig and Hunt, *Managing Public Relations* (1984). This work was quickly accepted and disseminated as the first public relations theory that proposed an ethical version of the discipline.

Grunig and Hunt defined public relations as 'the management of communication between an organization and its public' (1984: 5) and identified four modern practice models. It should be emphasised that the 'Grunigian paradigm' (Gonçalves, 2010) admits that much of public relations practice is propaganda. Three of the four models (*agency*, *public information* and *two-way asymmetrical model*) remain associated with the asymmetrical communication practice. This takes place when the organisation only seeks to persuade the public for their own advantage. This is thus why asymmetrical communication is considered 'unethical and socially irresponsible' (Grunig & White, 1992: 38-42). Only the 4th model – *two-way asymmetrical model* – seeks to sever public relations from propaganda. This is a participatory and dialogic model, in which the ultimate aim of public relations is to balance the interests of the organisation and those of their publics.

It was based on the symmetrical model that Grunig and his team built the *Excellence theory* (Grunig *et al.*, 1992), in which they identified the principles underlying the success of public relations good practice. At the core of this theory lies the principle that public relations should be an autonomous and integrated management function, and the principle that such management should be focused on the development of mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and the publics. The underlying idea is the following: symmetrical communication is more effective than asymmetrical communication because, by promoting mutual trust, the organisation is also fostering the support of their publics for their causes. And if faced with lower pressure from the environment, this organisation (whether political or other) can more easily implement their policies and legitimise their actions and behaviour in the public space.

Although it is widely criticised for its normative and idealistic profile over the Public Relations practice (L'Etang, 2006; Moloney, 2006), the Grunigian paradigm, it should be emphasised, placed the concept of 'relationships' at the centre of the debate in the study of organisational communication. But it was certainly the new two-way communication possibilities enabled by the 'new media' that led to the exponential increase in the number of public relations studies guided by that which was later known as 'relationship management theory' (Ledingham 2000, 2006). In this relational perspective, the thesis stands out that all strategies and tactics developed by public relations are determined based on the effects that they may produce in the relationship between an organisation and the publics.

DIGITAL CHALLENGES

In the current 'media ecology' (Scolari, 2012), the Internet plays a core role in the development of communication strategies. The new digital communication technologies, especially since the emergence of Web 2.0, have become a crucial channel for building relationships between organisations and their publics, both at the business and political level.

According to Ledingham and Bruning (2000: xiii), the seeds of relational theory were planted in 1984 by M. Ferguson in an article that placed the 'relationship' at the centre of public relations theory. This view was quickly disseminated in various manuals, such as 'Effective Public Relations', by Cutlip, Center and Broom (1994: 2), who defined public relations as 'the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics, on whom their success or failures depend'. Later, Ledingham and Bruning (1998: 62) proposed a preliminary definition for the organisation-public relationship as 'the state that exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity.' They thus characterised the ideal relationship between an organisation and their public as positive mutual interdependence.

For a better understanding of this interdependence, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) identified five dimensions that influence the perception that the publics have of their relationship with the organisation: trust, openness, involvement, commitment and investment in the relationship. The authors found that a good perception of these dimensions is correlated with a more favourable opinion of the public about the organisation and vice versa. *Trust* describes the mutual feeling of those involved in the relationship, and *openness* means a determination to communicate frankly. *Involvement* shows that both the organisation and the public are engaged in promoting mutual interests to maintain a long-term relationship. *Investment* 'refers to the time, energy, feelings, efforts and other resources given to building the relationship' (Ledingham and Bruning, 1998: 58).

The volume of research into relationship management increased dramatically thanks to the potential of the Internet to maximise dialogic communication. Kent and Taylor – who are considered the pioneers in studying the use of the web to create, adapt and change the relationships between organisations and their publics – state that 'dialogue is any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions' (1998: 325). They list 5 guiding principles underlying the construction of dialogic relationships through websites. Firstly, organisations should use the Internet to produce the 'dialogic loop'. That is, *websites* should allow their publics to challenge the organisations and, more importantly, provide organisations with an opportunity to answer their questions and address their concerns and problems (Kent & Taylor: 1998: 326). The 2nd principle focuses on the 'usefulness of information'; websites should provide general information, even when they include messages targeted at more specific publics (such as online press rooms). Choosing to provide useful information also enables the generation of return visits, which is the 3rd dialogic principle. Hence the relevance of keeping the website updated and offering varied content. According to Kent and Taylor (1998), 'the intuitiveness/ease of the interface' and the 'conservation of

visitors' are the remaining guiding principles. When the goal is to create relationships, the browsing experience has to be perfect; it has to include only interesting links and avoid advertising, otherwise Internet users will not access a website frequently.

The principles of Kent and Taylor applied to the dialogic management of online relationships have been applied to the study of websites, blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter and Wikis (John & Kim, 2003; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Park & Reber, 2008; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Hickerson & Thompson, 2009). According to Men & Tsai (2012: 78), there are three essential strategies to building relationships and interactions on the Internet. The first strategy, *openness or disclosure*, corresponds to the willingness of organisations to engage in a direct or open conversation with the publics. For a full openness, organisations must provide a complete description of the organisation, their history, mission and objectives; they must use hyperlinks to forward Internet users to their website; and they must use logos or other visual cues that provide intuitive identification elements. The second strategy, *information dissemination*, consists of addressing the needs, concerns and interests of the publics, while disseminating organisational information (e.g. posts containing warnings or press releases.) This information enables the publics to establish a relationship with the organisation as informed partners. Finally, *interactivity* and *involvement* play an important role in planting relationships, either by offering the public an opportunity to contact the organisation (by e-mail, chat, forum), or allowing them to share information online (e.g. via Facebook).

These studies, like most research on the dialogic and relational potential of public relations practice in an Internet environment, stresses the relevance of continuing feedback -- the dialogic loop -- and emphasises the monitoring of online 'conversations'. Moreover, they focus mainly on the business sphere, thus leaving open vast research possibilities applied to the political and governmental sphere.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

An approach to public relations from the relationship management theory that places the dialogic possibility of the Internet at the centre is extremely interesting for the study of organisations operating in the political sphere. Perhaps for this reason, Stromback and Kioussis (2011: 8) placed the relational perspective at the centre of their definition of political public relations:

Political public relations is the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to *influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships* [emphasis added] and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals.

However, to date little is known about the role of the Internet in strengthening the relationship efforts from a public relations perspective, at the level of strategic management of political communication. It could be argued that research into political

communication is more interested in strategies to secure votes than to listen to voters as citizens. In fact, since Obama's presidential campaign in 2008, many studies have focused on the power of the Internet to assist election efforts, also from the perspective of the relationship management theory (e.g. Levenshus, 2010). But it is more difficult to find studies focusing on the tools available on the Internet to build relationships in the so-called 'normal' times, i.e. in-between campaigns. In a sense, it can be argued, like Karlson *et al.* (2013), that the relationship management theory draws the attention to the fact that political organisations (e.g. political parties) are unable to manage relationships that resist time if they focus their communication efforts on election periods. If we consider that, in the field of brand communication, loyalty and trust are built over time, then is it not also important that political actors invest in creating and nurturing continuing relationships with citizens? This is certainly a line of research yet to be explored in the field of political public relations.

Another line of research focused on relationship management and dialogic communication enabled by the 'new media' can also be considered, building upon the Grunigian dichotomy between symmetrical and asymmetrical communication. In fact, although it is reasonable to assume that there are differences in the practice of public relations (Xifra, 2010), depending on the political organisation and the context in which it operates, public relations models have rarely been applied to political communication studies (Xifra, 2010, is one exception). During election periods, it is only natural that the *publicity* and *two-way asymmetrical* models are the most common. Due to the highly competitive nature of the electoral campaign, whose aim is to convince the public that the campaign object (a party, a candidate) is the best choice, communication is always clearly in favour of the sender's awareness, and built on research and surveys (McKeown & Plowman, 1999). It is true that parties currently campaign on a permanent basis (Blumenthal, 1980), but can it not be wondered whether the two-way symmetrical model is not more effective in-between campaigns? Symmetrical assumptions seem applicable to intra-party communication, negotiations between parties and the policy building process itself. This is another line of research that may guide several studies in the emerging field of political public relations.

As discussed in the beginning of the article, the relational perspective helped transfer the idea of public relations as a synonym of propaganda, manipulation of public opinion, into the idea that public relations can establish, build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between the organisation and their publics. This does not mean, however, that persuasion runs against the relational perspective. After all, using communication to influence perceptions and behaviour is inherent to public relations and to any political communication process. It does mean that, according to the relational perspective, the success of public relations will be measured based on the quality of the relationship between the organisation and their publics, and not just on the ability to influence their opinions. Several authors have defined different features to characterise quality relationships: trust, openness, satisfaction, access, involvement, commitment, investment, mutual control (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ledingham,

2011). These and other attributes can be studied empirically, thus providing a barometer of the success / failure of relationships in the political sphere.

In the context of political communication, political parties can be considered the most important political organisations, as they play various roles, unlike any other political organisation. Political parties facilitate voters' choices, mobilise people to participate, recruit and train political candidates and leaders, articulate and gather political interests, and organise both the government and the opposition (Stromback & Kioussis, 2011: 9). Thus, there are many relational possibilities worth exploring, building upon the political party organisation: relationships between different political parties and their voters; relationships between political parties and their members; relationships between political parties and citizens; relationships between political parties and the government; and relationships between the government and the opposition, among others. At the same time, an empirical in-depth research can be conducted into several relationship and communication strategies, especially in the Web 2.0 environment, as the research in the field of corporate public relations itself has demonstrated.

To conclude, a question remains open. Ultimately, if all research possibilities suggested in this article are conducted, will not political public relations contribute to the study of democracy itself? //

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