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## Envisioning communication from the edge

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### Abstract

In mapping movements on the edge, we explore how scholars redefine the boundaries of what constitutes research and practice. In *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty through Profits*, a book that already promises to be one of the seminal business books of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, C. K. Prahalad (2004) recounts his difficulties in finding a journal to publish the research that informed his book. Thanks to his earlier success with a prizewinning bestseller on more conventional business strategy, *Competing for the Future* (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994), Prahalad went on to find a book publisher despite the academic journal rejections. His efforts, we would argue, were powered by his Asian origins and his desire to apply his business knowledge to make a positive difference to people disempowered by living at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

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# Envisioning communication from the edge

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In mapping movements on the edge, we explore how scholars redefine the boundaries of what constitutes research and practice. In *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty through Profits*, a book that already promises to be one of the seminal business books of the 21st century, C. K. Prahalad (2004) recounts his difficulties in finding a journal to publish the research that informed his book. Thanks to his earlier success with a prizewinning bestseller on more conventional business strategy, *Competing for the Future* (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994), Prahalad went on to find a book publisher despite the academic journal rejections. His efforts, we would argue, were powered by his Asian origins and his desire to apply his business knowledge to make a positive difference to people disempowered by living at the bottom of the economic pyramid.

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Within communication, and especially critical communication management, one major figure has been Stan Deetz (2005), who recently reflected on the roots of his own personal development as a critical scholar:

*My personal biography is clearly represented in my critical scholarly work ... My reconstruction and presentation of critical theory ... inevitably reveals biography. I grew up relatively poor on a dairy farm in a small, rural, isolated community in Indiana. The emphasis there was on the community, family, and church as central institutions giving meaning and direction to life. The 'simple life' was a core moral theme: taking only what you needed, giving back as much as you could. Decision making guided by the health of the community, driven by consensus and the need to endlessly live together, was an everyday reality. Farm work is very lonely and contemplative but also cooperative and collaborative. The extended illness, and finally the death, of my sister accentuated and deepened these cultural properties and heightened my sense that the world was filled with both injustices and beauty, some of which you can do something about and some not. (p. 87)*

Before reading these reflections, we had agreed that margin-pushing research often stems from the unique backgrounds, motivations, and orientations of the researchers themselves. To make this more transparent in our own cases, we also pushed each other to risk entering Mumby and May's (2005) 'discourse of vulnerability' (p. 12) to reveal autobiographical aspects and to suggest how they relate to our disciplinary inclinations.

### **David McKie**

The most influential educational intervention in my life occurred at fourteen. It came in the form of an in-class pronouncement, by a teacher whom I disliked intensely, that I would never get into university. Until that point, to be honest, the thought had never entered my head. However, as those who know me will readily acknowledge, I have a stubborn streak. In that rather unusual fashion, the possibility of university study—more through wanting to prove the teacher wrong than seeking to extend my intellectual horizons—became lodged in my mind. So I returned to study as a mature-age student through night classes, and then through a grant, and have now spent over 30 years as a student and lecturer across four continents. Through it all, I have retained an abiding sense that I don't belong in tertiary educational establishments, a keen desire to assist others in similar positions of doubt to go forward and learn anyway, and a restless search for a disciplinary home that would make a practical difference to inequality.

That history and those feelings have long fed my partiality to edges. It influenced the call for papers for this issue of the journal—essentially aimed towards anyone who felt themselves to be on any kind of academic extremity. However, on reading the papers, and especially Debashish Munshi's position (see below), I have to come to terms with, perhaps, being in denial. As Professor and Co-Chair of Management Communication at the Waikato Management School, I can no longer claim marginal outsider status. So, is the residual attachment merely a rather sad post-1960s existential angst that deserves to be abandoned? Or might there still be edges that can be sharpened to a good point from my present context? Let me run some rough ideas through the lens of discipline differentiation.

Management communication itself, as a discipline, and sometimes as a department, is still contested, marginal, and at odds with much of the business academy (and none too highly regarded as 'sell-outs in suits' by communication colleagues in the more socially critical fields of cultural and media studies). Nevertheless, within business and management studies, communication seeks to make a stand for a certain orientation. The choice of orientation is, I believe, vital, and its rationale requires an explanatory detour on the nature of disciplines. In the early 1990s, calling for papers for the *Journal of Communication's* special issue on 'The Future of the Field—Between Fragmentation and Cohesion', the editors claimed: 'Communication scholarship lacks disciplinary status because it has no core of knowledge. Thus institutional and scholarly legitimacy remains a chimera for the field' (Gurevitch & Levy, cited in Shepherd, 1993, p. 83). Now, given my Glaswegian educational origins, and the fact that my mother was born out of wedlock, I am not someone who finds stigma in illegitimacy. Moreover, as a product of state schools intended for the British general public and not the so-called 'public' schools reserved almost exclusively for the scions of the wealthy, I have no wish to mobilise disciplines' historical-semantic connections with the 17th-century description of 'strict discipline' (Walhausen, cited in Foucault, 1977, p. 170) as an art of correct training.

Where I do have problems is with the allegation that a lack of disciplinary status stems from the absence of a foundational set of ideas. That would make communication studies, cultural studies, management communication, media studies, and public relations no more than parasites feeding off real disciplines. Instead, following Shepherd (1993), I take the view that 'disciplines are defined not by cores of knowledge (i.e., epistemologies) but by views of Being

(i.e., ontologies)' (p. 83)—that is to say, more by orientation than by content. Etymological considerations lend weight to that perspective. The word 'discipline' itself derives from the Latin *disciplina*, 'instruction of disciples', and disciples, in turn, are instructed in a doctrine or indoctrinated by doctors, so that 'Berkeley could write that to be "undisciplined" is to be "nurtured to no doctrine"' (p. 83). In short, therefore, academic disciplines have depended more on faith, indoctrination, and training than on any core of knowledge. Accordingly, I see disciplines as distinguished more by what they value, and/or how they inquire (i.e., orientation), than by any agreed knowledge base.

The major point of this exercise is that orientation to whatever is being studied is the key to what distinguishes disciplines. Shepherd (1993) clarifies the point by posing a series of questions about the characterisation of disciplinary ontology:

*Is existence best understood as cultural, creative or chromosomal? Is the foundation for all best thought of as the molecule, a commodity, or time? Is ontology best viewed as rational, material, or governmental? (p. 84)*

From his standpoint, disciplinary ontologies become imperfect approximations of how they look at the world: 'They depend on disciples acting as advocates for the ontology they put forward, making implicit and explicit claims that their view "matters"' (p. 84). So, what might be the orientation of management communication? My answer is that we are still fighting for it against a range of contenders from claimants in business communication, who would reduce it to a much less intellectual and much more functionalist and skills-centred enterprise, through to the apologist corporate communication perspectives exemplified by Argenti and Forman's (2002) positioning of culturejamming and 'the increasing verbal attacks on corporate America' (p. 5) as the 'foreshadowing' (p. 5) of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Here in New Zealand, our project is to situate it as part of a wider movement towards egalitarianism, inclusiveness, sustainability, and social responsibility. And we want to shift that movement away from the edge and into the centre.

## **Judy Motion**

Asking risky questions from a young age signalled the beginning of my career as a critical scholar. Questioning medical pronouncements, religious teachings, and political decisions provided me with diverse

experiences of challenging mainstream expertise. Communication was an obvious home for me—early photos show me animatedly talking on a toy phone—and debating offered training in how to argue for unpopular perspectives. However, it was as an environmental activist that I became intensely aware of and intrigued by the influence of public relations on societal issues. Questions about power, truth, public interest, and decision-making emerged from my experiences of confronting local government. Yet studying public relations as an academic subject offered very limited insights into public relations in this part of the world. Edging away from mainstream perspectives to critical scholarship and discourse studies opened up new possibilities for research and practice.

Cheney and Christensen (2001) ask:

*what if we simultaneously decentered the role of organization, seriously modified our ideas about technical rationality, and gave up on some of our objectives to bring diverse audiences in line with a dominant view of the organization? Could public relations live with such a contingent form of control over its environment? (p. 182)*

If critical public relations perspectives were to prevail, then the question could be answered affirmatively. Viewing public relations as merely an organisational function has indeed obscured the societal, political, and personal nature of public relations and limited the possibilities for critical scholarship in the field (see Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Even more importantly, it has prevented the development of critical public relations practice. This vision for repositioning critical public relations is an act of resistance against the constraints of managerialism in public relations and an act of hope—hope that the field can be opened to greater scrutiny and critique and, as a consequence, can engage in critical reflection upon the role of public relations in society and work for the betterment of society.

### ***Beyond organisational boundaries***

From an organisational perspective, public relations is conceived of as a communication and/or relationship function that serves to legitimate business within society (Roper, in press). Public relations as a profession or practice serves organisational purposes first, but may also be deployed to serve broader societal needs. Moving public relations beyond the constraints of organisational boundaries to transform how we understand and practise public relations will mean we have to rethink the notion of what public relations is and what it can do.

Public relations is not something that occurs only in organisations; it is part of our everyday lives when we are engaged in public advocacy, promotion, or dialogue. If we are negotiating power relations, producing and contesting knowledge, and advocating moral and/or immoral truths or actions, then we are engaged with public relations. As critical public relations scholars, we position power, knowledge, and morality as central issues for public relations.

### ***Public relations as power negotiation***

Public relations is an inherently political act, and the minimal discussions of power by scholars and practitioners are a continued source of puzzlement. Critical perspectives on public relations focus attention on the role of public relations in society, its impact on democratic processes, and issues of power (see Weaver, Motion, & Roper, in press). A crucial first step for public relations scholars is to engage with various theories of power in order to provide multiple insights into the role of public relations in society. As a brief example, Foucault's work repositions power as a relational and productive force. For Foucault (1980), power meant relations, 'a more or less organised, hierarchical cluster of relations' (p. 198). This understanding highlights the interaction between power and relationships.

Relationship management has become a valid topic for public relations scholarship (see Coombes, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), but a critical lens is needed to examine the often instrumental nature of such relationship approaches and to focus on the notions of vested interests, power imbalances, and struggles within such relationships. The challenge for critical public relations scholars who draw upon Foucauldian insights is to reconcile such a critique of power with the notion of power as a productive force. According to Foucault (1980), 'what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse' (p. 119). Critical scholarship that draws upon this perspective could thus shift to an examination of a network of power relations and effects, which may be positive and productive and lead to critical public relations practice. That is, public relations may be used for inclusive societal purposes such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainable business practices (see Demetrious & Hughes, 2004, for a critique of public relations and CSR).



### ***Public relations as knowledge work***

In order to develop the notion of critical public relations practice, the role of public relations in constructing and circulating knowledge must be considered. Examination of public relations as knowledge work originates from Toth and Heath's (1992) conceptualisation of the role as vitally concerned with meaning. Public relations professionals actively constitute and represent how we know and speak about the work, and thereby impact upon our identities, relationships, and knowledge (Motion & Leitch, 1996). Examination of public relations as knowledge work focuses attention on change and offers exciting possibilities for critical public relations practice. For example, when Goggin and Newell in this issue of the journal envisage a new role for disability in society, they may be said to be engaging in critical public relations practice, questioning societal values and practices, and offering new ways of understanding the world. The identities of people with disabilities, understandings of disability, and ways of relating to the disability community are all challenged, and a transformative vision is made possible. When Munshi (see below) draws upon postcolonial theory to urge for the development of more inclusive forms of communication practice, he too may be said to be engaging in radical knowledge work. Critical public relations practice, then, is a form of radical knowledge work leading to societal transformation.

### ***Public relations as moral imperative***

Morality must function as the integrative dimension for critical public relations scholarship and practice, focusing on moral relationships and moral knowledge work. The prevailing organisational perspective of public relations has meant that the predominant ethic or moral standards that are applied within the discipline/field are those of business. In contrast, critical public relations needs to ensure that the ethics applied are those of democratic and societal ideals. However, determining what is a democratic or societal moral norm is a fraught and contested process. A fundamental challenge for public relations is to critically problematise notions of morality and public interest. To ask: whose morality? and whose interest?

Bourdieu (1998) states that 'it is infinitely easier to take up a position for or against an idea, a value, a person, an institution or a situation, than to analyse what it truly is, in all its complexity' (p. 22). Relocating critical public relations as the nexus between societal ideals and

practice offers opportunities to open public relations scholarship and practice to new lines of thought, investigation, and critique, and thereby enable us to understand the complexity of public relations.

### **Debashish Munshi**

Within the disciplines of public relations and management communication (and in the larger domain of the academy), I see myself as an 'other'. This perception is, first of all, a *personal* one, based as it is on the fact that I am an 'outsider' of sorts, having come to the more sedate environs of the academy after a long stint in the breathless world of journalism.

The ongoing challenge for me has been to negotiate and mediate the wall between journalism and academics. Many academics believe journalists look at issues superficially and report them to a mass audience, while many journalists tend to think that academics are far removed from the real world and work on esoteric subjects that interest only a select few in their respective fields. Neither observation is, of course, entirely true. My efforts to draw from both professions help me to bridge theory and praxis.

My obsession to relate theory to the social and cultural contexts of everyday life and to theorise lived experiences is also a *political* one, as I see myself as a postcolonial researcher. Postcolonial theory defines the 'other' as being 'marginalized by imperial discourse' (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998, p. 170). That is to say, consistent with a Foucauldian perspective, the 'other' is who, or what, is on the margins of established, taken-for-granted practices. I see myself as an 'other' because I am driven by the idea of looking at the field of communication in ways that are different from established, Western, mainstream approaches.

The management of communication has long been restricted to the use of rusty functional tools such as business letters, proposals and reports, and strategic business plans, presentations, and persuasive campaigns. All these tools are weapons of mass conformity in the colonising arsenal of a seemingly benign Western world-view. In the true spirit of postcolonial research, I aim to 'interrogate the universalizing discourse of Western modernity' (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 262) and envisage a more open-ended approach to communication that is not only more relevant for today's diverse workplace, but also ethical, sustainable, and deterritorialised.

This approach has helped me re-imagine communication management in a way that takes away the controlling dimensions of 'management' from dominant Western perspectives. The theory and practice of public relations have long been colonised by perspectives that see minority publics as groups that need to be managed. For example, the outwardly egalitarian concept of requisite variety in public relations literature allows public relations to take note of the cultural 'other' but does little to shift the balance of power away from dominant Western elites (see Munshi, 1999).

A shift in the balance of power is possible only through a greater acknowledgment of diversity. By diversity, I don't necessarily mean mere ethnic diversity, but a plurality in the way we do things, an acknowledgment that research can be, and indeed ought to be, multidimensional and interdisciplinary. It is by drawing on ideas from fields as diverse as biodiversity, futurology, postcolonial criticism, and subaltern historiography that we can realign communication management and bring publics long marginalised in public relations discourse into the core of both theory and practice (see Munshi & McKie, 2001).

Plurality is inextricably linked to subjectivity. I have long held the view that research can be meaningful and nuanced when there is a greater recognition of the researchers' voices and the social and political context within which they are embedded. In my own research, I have chosen to bring the subjective dimension to the centre (see, e.g., Munshi, in press), for, as Denzin (1992) says, 'In this world called reality, where we are forced to react, and life leaks in everywhere, we have nothing to hold on to but our own being' (p. 27). And yet 'our own being' is woven together by the countless strands of intellectual and emotional thread from a whole range of people who help us make sense of the research we do and the papers we write.

The inclusion of subjective experiences, especially the author's own, to question the legitimacy of academic theorising leads to a greater emphasis on reflexivity. It is through such reflexivity that researchers can effectively resist the sites of control manifested in entrenched world-views, perspectives, and decisions that have traditionally been deemed to be 'naturally' objective. This so-called objectivity has historically gone against the interests of the colonised native (Fanon, 1967; McClintock, 1995) and can similarly go against perspectives

from disciplinary 'margins'. To make any meaningful change, we must be able to listen to the innermost voices of not just ourselves but also of all those working to make scholarship sustainable and worthy of practice.

It is in line with this goal that we invited authors in this collection to take positions that cut in from diverse edges, with the hope that their voices may influence better mainstream futures. Their voices bring issues of diversity, ethics, knowledge access, risk, and sustainability out of the margins and position them as central to communication scholarship.

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