

Public Relations in the Enactment of Civil Society

Maureen Taylor

This *Handbook* seeks to create and extend our knowledge about public relations theory and practice. Creating knowledge is a dynamic process in which fields of study expand and paradigms change when members of an academic or professional community ponder and work to answer difficult questions (Kuhn, 1970). In this tradition, many questions about public relations as a practice and as an academic discipline need to be examined as the field moves forward. One of the more interesting questions that comes up regularly asks, “What is the role of public relations in society?” Answers to this question will influence how people practice public relations, and the answers will also influence the way in which researchers theorize about public relations. This chapter seeks to provide one answer to this question by first exploring the role of public relations in society. The second section explores the concept of civil society as another way of thinking about a macro role for public relations in society. The final sections suggest research methods for studying a public relations

approach to civil society and identify future directions for public relations research and practice.

Evolving Perspectives on Public Relations

One way to answer the question about societal roles for public relations is to consider where public relations research and practice have been and then anticipate where the theories and practices are heading. This type of macro and meta-analysis allows for a holistic framework to understand the discipline and the practice. Looking at the past, we see that practices associated with public relations have been traced back thousands of years (Kunczik, 1997). Kings, military leaders, and activists have communicated to publics through a variety of tactics. Yet the formal academic study of public relations is a relatively recent endeavor. Consider that the first academic journal dedicated to public relations research, *Public Relations Review*, was published

in 1974. The academic study of public relations is less than 40 years old. We can learn a lot about our past by looking at the articles appearing in the early years of *Public Relations Review*. Early articles focused on very practical issues in conducting public relations such as media relations and agenda setting.

Botan and Taylor (2004) observed that previous public relations research has followed a functional approach. A functional approach to public relations focuses on

techniques and production of strategic organizational messages. Research plays a role only insofar as it advances organizational goals. The major relationship of interest is between the public relations practitioner and the media with a corresponding emphasis on journalistic techniques and production skills. Research from a functional perspective has traditionally been concerned with business-oriented topics such as advertising, marketing, and media relations. Under this approach, researchers focus on the use of public relations as an instrument to accomplish specific organizational goals rather than on relationships. (pp. 650–651)

Public relations scholarship following a functional approach inquires about effective media relations, links to advertising, explaining public relations to clients, measuring impact of media placements, agenda setting, and strategic message design. A public relations practitioner or scholar who follows the functional approach might answer the question about public relations' role in society as "*public relations creates and disseminates information that helps the organization to accomplish its goals.*" This societal role of public relations would most likely be accepted without question from many professionals in business, government agencies, and the nonprofit community.

Botan and Taylor (2004) noted that recent public relations theory-driven research has followed a cocreational approach, whereby publics and groups are cocreators of meaning. In this approach, public relations is what

makes it possible to agree to shared meanings, interpretations, and goals. This perspective is long term in its orientation and focuses on relationships among publics and organizations. Research is used to advance understanding and the perspective embraces theories that either explicitly share these values (e.g., relational approaches or community) or can be used to advance them. (p. 652)

The cocreational approach does not confine the study of public relations to the functional outputs of organizational communication such as news releases, Web sites, or advertisements. Instead, the cocreational approach studies formation of meaning through communication and as the development of relationships between groups and organizations. Communication allows both groups and organizations to negotiate and change relationships with others. The benefit of the cocreational approach is that "publics are not just a means to an end. Publics are not instrumentalized but instead are partners in the meaning-making process" (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652).

Theories that fall under a cocreational approach include relational theory (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Ferguson, 1984; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000), dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Pearson, 1989), communitarism (Leeper, 1986), fully functioning society theory (FFST; Heath, 2006), and rhetorical theory. Based on symbolic interactionism, cocreational theories generally view communication, relationships, and coconstructed meaning as core assumptions of how public relations functions in society.

A public relations practitioner or scholar who follows the cocreational perspective might answer the question about public relations' role in society as "*public relations uses communication to help groups to negotiate meaning and build relationships.*" A defining value of the cocreational perspective is that publics are not treated as "economic variables" that merely buy, sell, or respond to organizational outputs. The cocreational perspective

avoids segmenting publics into demographic or even psychographic categories to predict their behaviors. Rather, a cocreational perspective treats individuals or groups who share interpretations as partners that are necessary for decision making at different levels of society.

The functional approach and the cocreational approach are not irreconcilable. People need the information created and disseminated by all types of social actors to be able to make informed decisions. Information from diverse sources is a necessary component of modern democratic life. Likewise, the assumptions of cocreational theories point us to the rhetorical and symbolic nature of human knowledge and the role that communication plays in an informed citizenry. But information and communication for decision making require certain conditions to exist. To truly get at a fundamental understanding of the role of public relations in a society, we must go back one more step from these approaches. We need to examine which conditions must exist before individuals and organizations create the information that helps them and others make sense of their worlds. We need to understand that there are certain societal conditions that are prerequisites for either the functional or cocreational approaches to public relations to exist.

This chapter provides a third way for understanding the societal role of public relations. It argues that both a functional approach and a cocreational approach to public relations together contribute to a society where people, groups, and organizations have the desire and agency to make their community/society/world a better place to live. Information (from the functional approach) and rhetorical discourse and symbolic action (from the cocreational approach) are possible when they exist within a civil society. Thus, a third answer to the question posed in the beginning of this chapter is: “*Public relations’ role in society is to create (and re-create) the conditions that enact civil society.*” The next part of this chapter explores civil society theory and positions public relations

as one condition as that which makes civil society possible.

Public Relations Builds the Relationships That Build Social Capital

Civil Society Theory

Civic society theory had its roots in ancient Greece and Rome, and it evolved into the Enlightenment conception of *civil society* (Hauser, 1998). Both the ancient and Enlightenment epochs were characterized by a growing awareness of public deliberations and decision making. Hauser (1997) defined civil society as “the network of associations independent of the state whose members, through social interactions that balance conflict and consensus, seek to regulate themselves in ways consistent with a valuation of difference” (p. 277). In other words, civil society was not about having one common idea; it was about a tolerance of debating different ideas. Hauser (1998) traced the historical development of the concept of civil society and argued that civil society provides an alternative way of understanding the discursive nature of the public sphere. Hauser’s essays provided a starting place for understanding a public relations approach to civil society because he placed civil society within a discursive community framework that requires rhetoric. Hauser viewed society not as one big public sphere but as multiple spheres or “nested arenas” (p. 21), where there is the accommodation of a diversity of views (p. 26).

Tolerance of different opinions is a central point of civil society because it is the “evolution of cooperation and trust among citizens” (Hadenius & Uggla, 1996, p. 1622). Civil society is a communicative process grounded in information, communication, and relationships. Civil society theory not only embodies cocreational assumptions about public relations but also accepts that functional practices of public relations are inherent in a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006).

Some social theorists, such as Habermas, have critiqued public relations as serving only elite interests, and there are indeed some examples of how public relations has been used to accomplish selfish, not society-driven goals. For instance, the Hill and Knowlton's Citizens for a Free Kuwait campaign provides an example of how traditional public relations tactics can obscure, not highlight, the truth. Yet Hauser's (1998) conceptualization of nested arenas confronts Habermas's and others' fears that civil society can be co-opted by elites. Co-optation is always a possibility, but it is not a foregone conclusion of a resource-driven society. Hauser correctly noted that "whether civil society embraces and lives in truth is fundamentally dependent on whether or not its members are informed and attentive to the truth" (p. 30). In other words, people must have information, and they must be interested and able to pursue what they believe to be right.

The conception of society enacted by nested arenas depends on several interrelated conditions. Taylor (2009) argued that civil society is a process grounded in rhetoric. For civil society to occur, there must *first* be someone or some group that feels safe to create discourse that positions their views within the larger societal framework. Successful discourse will draw on some commonly accepted values, beliefs, or experiences. *Second*, there must be some trusted channels to carry the messages. The channels can include face-to-face communication and print, electronic (radio and television), or even digital media. *Third*, there must be others in the society who are listening to and considering the arguments in the discourse. And *finally*, there must be some societal process or system that enables people to pursue the call of the discourse.

What people do when they encounter societal discourse is their choice. Boulding (1977) posited that one of three outcomes can happen when individuals and societies come in contact with messages. First, messages can produce no change in the current images that people hold. Individuals or society may ignore the content of the message and continue on with their lives. The second thing

that can happen is that a message can provide additional information to individuals' and society's existing images. Here, people may begin to consider alternative views but do nothing with this new information. Third, in rare cases, some messages encourage revolutionary change in a person's or society's image of the world. Individuals or society might make a change in their lives, values, or behaviors based on this information. Images, however, are fairly resistant to change, and Boulding noted that this third option is the least likely outcome of messages.

A public relations approach to civil society builds on Boulding's (1977) conceptualization of images, knowledge, and change. Civil society is about informed choice and enlightened action. Enlightened action, however, does not necessarily mean that interactants sit down together to engage in rational discourse to discuss the images that shape their understanding of the world. Sometimes *symbolic action* is needed before the *discourse* becomes something that people can pay attention to. DeLuca and Peeples (2002) provided an illustration of how "image events" (p. 135) may create wedges in societal consciousness that prompt discussions of topics that have been ignored by the mainstream media and societal institutions.

DeLuca and Peeples (2002) described how activist organizations have used publicity not to corrupt the public sphere but, instead, to bring topics before the public so that they can be discussed. Their example of anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) activists showed how small groups can use publicity to gain access to the "public screen" through image and pseudo events. Tactics such as boycotts, protests, speeches, and even the threat of violence attracted media attention to the antiglobalization message. Media coverage of the threats and actions of antiglobalization activists brought the issue into the living rooms of Americans. What the activists could not do in their strategic communication, they accomplished with their symbolic action. The media coverage during the WTO meeting allowed activists to raise concerns about human rights, environmental

protection, and multinational corporations in a national discussion (even if only for a few days).

Hauser's consideration of civil society fits nicely with other cocreational theories in public relations. One of the clearest links is to Heath's (2006) FFST. FFST identifies the premises of how rhetoric and public relations can help make society a better place to live. A fully functioning society posits that relationships among organizations and groups create social capital that makes communities stronger and better able to meet the needs of members. Civil society is a rhetorical process that creates the conditions for social capital to emerge as an outcome of the actions of different actors. The next section explores social capital as an outcome of public relations activities.

Social Capital as an Outcome of Relationships

There are many different types of capital. Ihlen (2007) introduced the work of Pierre Bourdieu to public relations scholars. Bourdieu (1986) identified economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital as forms of symbolic capital that can be drawn on by individuals and organizations. Coleman (1988) noted that social capital is less tangible than economic capital because it exists in relationships among people and groups. Social capital produces trust, provides information, and creates the norms of society. According to Coleman, social capital also establishes sanctions against those who violate the norms of society. Social capital, unlike private economic capital, creates a type of public good that benefits many members of a society. The benefit exists even for those who were not involved in an activity or relationship.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) argued that the concept of social capital emerged from community/neighborhood studies in the late 1960s. By the mid-1980s, social capital had become an accepted sociological concept that sought to explain the various relationships that are foundational for a society (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman,

1988). Lewis (2005) has suggested that organizational communication scholars should study social capital to show how organizations contribute to society. The same can be true for public relations scholars—social capital is one way that public relations contributes to society. Civil society is a process grounded in rhetoric, and the outcome of civil society is a system of trusting and supportive interconnected organizations (social capital).

Enacting Civil Society

Taylor (2009) explicated a rhetorical public relations approach to civil society arguing that the heart of civil society is discourse. Discourse provides the nexus of civil society because it is the way that interested parties can participate in multiple and often competing public spheres. As participants in this discourse, Taylor identified seven civil society partners, including individuals, social cause groups, societal institutions, media, business organizations, governance, and international organizations. Table 1.1 explains each partner in greater depth. These seven partners create a foundation for civil society by representing different citizen interests. Partners develop their own networks of like-minded organizations to pursue common interests. Civil society exists when these partners have interrelated objectives. When the interests of two or more civil society partners converge, then there is a much greater opportunity for those groups to achieve their goals. An enduring civil society occurs in the intersection of all the seven partners' interests. It is the relationships and interconnections that make a community a good place to live. And, when these relationships and interconnections are missing, then civil society's potential is diminished.

Civil society partners may be known as sectors of society. There are three sectors that are considered in economic and political research. The first sector is the business community that creates economic capital. The second sector is the government that creates the conditions for economic

Table 1.1 Civil Society Partners

Citizens: The foundation of civil society is the public. Civil society is premised on an informed and empowered public. In a civil society, the public has the right and, more important, the desire to participate in local, regional, and national decisions. Moreover, the public feels safe when participating in all levels of community decision making. An appreciation of civil society begins in early education and continues throughout life. Unfortunately, in the public sphere, individual voices of citizens are not often heard. Thus, one of the best ways for citizens to articulate their needs is through participation in societal institutions.

Institutions: Societal institutions such as religious organizations, professional groups (associations of doctors, lawyers, educators), universities, unions, and political parties are necessary in a civil society. These institutions provide a means for citizens to articulate their needs. Legitimate institutions have the power to speak out on issues and because they are respected, their positions on issues are valued. In a civil society, institutions must operate at all levels of the society. Institutions gain influence when they cooperate with the media and provide information to the media that contributes to the public agenda.

Media: The value of an independent media to civil society is clear. They disseminate factual information that people use to make decisions. Moreover, because of the agenda-setting function of the media, they are opinion leaders on key topics. The media also serve as watchdogs to ensure that government officials and businesses are held accountable for their actions. The media are the nexus for communication between institutions, organizations, the government, and the public.

NGOs: Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) work on behalf of issues, but they are not part of the formal governmental structure. NGOs are organized groups of individuals, some small and others quite large, that are not yet institutionalized. However, some NGOs will become institutionalized as their value to the society becomes clear.

INGOs: International organizations (INGOs) provide financial and human resources to help facilitate development. These international organizations fund local groups who work to achieve societal goals. INGOs are especially important during the initial stages of civil society because they work directly with indigenous organizations and provide important training and activating of local civil society leaders.

Business: The business community also has a role to play in the development of civil society. Business organizations have opinions on issues such as regulation, licensing, access to natural resources, price controls, immigration laws, and legal reform. Their voices must also be included in civil discussions. However, too much influence from businesses or corporations may inhibit civil society development.

Governance: Civil society exists apart from the state. However, governance—the local, regional, and national leaders and members of the bureaucracy that support government—need to be accountable to the aforementioned partners. Government leaders need to carefully monitor public opinion and be willing to adapt to changing public needs. In civil society, government understands important issues and resolves them in a manner that benefits members of the society.

and cultural capital. The third sector is the non-profit or voluntary sector. This sector's function is to create social capital. Public relations helps all sectors accomplish their goals. The best way to demonstrate how public relations enacts civil society is to illustrate how different sectors engage in relationships that build or hinder the creation of social capital.

Governance and Social Capital. Most of the definitions of civil society place civil society outside the state. They do this for a good reason since civil society is supposed to be a watchdog or regulator of the state. Yet it is naive to believe that government has no role in the creation or destruction of social capital. Governments create tax policies and regulations that create the conditions for the formation of economic capital and social capital. To help foster social capital, some governments provide tax incentives for individuals and corporations to donate resources to religious organizations, societal institutions, and social cause groups.

Yet governments can also stop the formation of social capital through other policies. In China, two government policies inhibit the formation of social capital. First, the government has created government-organized NGOs (nongovernmental organizations). These organizations, known as GNGOs, have been initiated by the Chinese government and receive government subsidies. The people in the leadership positions are generally appointed by the government (He, 2008). Because of their quasi-independent, quasi-governmental status, GNGOs have the greatest access to the Chinese media. A recent study of media coverage of civil society topics showed that GNGOs are cited as sources in news stories more often than other types of NGOs in China by the government-controlled press (Yang & Taylor, 2009). A second policy that inhibits social capital creation in China is the government's policy of monitoring Internet searches. This policy diminishes the amount and type of information that people in China have for decision making.

Contributions of the First Sector. Corporations and businesses can also contribute to civil society when they support philanthropic activities or engage in activities that strengthen the communities in which they operate. The business sector is a foundation of civil society, and just like government, its actions can foster or diminish social capital.

On the positive side, many business organizations have corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives that create social capital by providing information or services to people who may not otherwise have access to such resources. CSR is much more than a philanthropic activity; it should be a process of organizational participation in ensuring the greater good of a community.

One example of this second sector social capital occurs when business leaders serve on community boards of directors. Such membership provides both tangible resources (money) and intangible resources (information, networking) to community groups. Corporate sponsorship of prosocial activities, such as Home Depot's support of Habitat for Humanity, and 9-Lives brand cat food support of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), provides examples of how the second sector can contribute to social capital formation.

The public relations function then can help organizations engage their community on a daily basis. Through public relations research, engagement, and the creation of relationships among community members, organizations can better serve their communities and create social capital.

Contributions of the Third Sector. Nonprofit organizations use public relations to inform people about issues ranging from local topics (environmental, zoning, local government watchdog functions) to national (policy reforms) and global issues (climate change, human rights policies). Lewis (2005) noted that this civil society sector is the fastest growing sector across the globe. There are nearly 2 million registered nonprofits in the United States. That means that there is one

nonprofit organization for every 100 adults in the United States. There are millions of other types of nonprofit groups sometimes called NGOs or community service organizations (CSOs) around the world. For civil society theorists, every time a CSO or social cause group communicates with members (either in person or online), there is the potential for creation of social capital. Public relations tactics maximize that social capital. Every news release, every public service announcement, and every community forum adds potential social capital.

One of the greatest challenges for civil society organizations is mobilizing people and resources. Freeman (1979) proposed that activist organizations need a variety of tangible and intangible mobilizing resources to accomplish their goals. Tangible resources are things that bring monetary resources into the organizations. Intangible resources bring awareness of the organization and its issues and help the organization reach new members. The Internet is a valuable resource because it provides information to a variety of publics and also links different groups together. It offers the opportunity to “transform sets of geographically dispersed aggrieved individuals into a densely connected aggrieved population, thus solving one key problem of mobilization” (Diani, 2000, p. 388). The Internet has the potential to provide both types of resources if certain societal conditions are met. For instance, government monitoring of the Internet and surveillance of Web searches does not promote civil society.

The Internet provides additional opportunities to maximize information sharing, collaboration, and meaning making. Every Web page and every social media tactic generated by nonprofit organizations has the potential to create social capital. The Internet as an advocacy tool is not a new topic for public relations scholars. As early as 1998, Coombs (1998) and Heath (1998) argued for the Internet’s use as a tool for activists. The Internet has most often been used as a one-way communication tool, but it can also be a relationship-building tool where the organization engages the visitor in two-way communication. Internet features, including Listservs, Blogs, and discussion groups,

enable communication and relationship building between dispersed people with similar interests.

How can we determine if civil society exists, what is its strength, and what factors may be contributing to or inhibiting it? There are a variety of research methodologies available for public relations researchers.

Measuring Civil Society

Civil society can be measured through a variety of qualitative, quantitative, and rhetorical methods. Sociologists were one of the first groups to study civil society and social capital created by professional, community, and organizational relationships. They attempted to measure social capital, connectiveness, and the relationships that link organizations in a system together. Topics of research included information sharing, cooperation and competition, network density, network evolution and decay, and reputation.

Political scientists such as Robert Putnam have used secondary data to measure civil society. Putnam (2000) obtained data from national trend studies to look at membership in voluntary associations. Social capital is created when people form relationships through activities such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), cultural groups, professional associations, and recreational activities. The trend studies showed that people were no longer participating in voluntary groups and, thus, were no longer benefitting from shared information or coordinated activities. Putnam noted that as people stopped participating in voluntary associations, social capital in the United States diminished.

Communication scholars have studied social capital in a variety of ways. Organizational communication research has examined how relationships among individuals in a firm, relationships among departments, and relationships among members of a particular kind of industry build both economic and social capital. Because so much of today’s communication is taking place in cyberspace, other researchers have also studied links between

Web sites to identify leaders in a network (Shumate, Fulk, & Monge, 2005). Other researchers have examined relationships among civil society organizations, media outlets, and international donors (Doerfel & Taylor, 2005; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003).

Taylor (2009) acknowledged the contributions of these scholarly areas and methodological approaches to studying civil society but concluded that these perspectives fail to account for “the idea that *meaning making and relationships* enact civil society. Civil society is not an outcome; it is a process grounded in rhetoric” (p. 83). The use of language to persuade and create shared understanding is at the heart of all aspects of civil society. Through symbolic action and discourse, individuals and organizations participate in Burke’s “wrangle of the marketplace” of ideas. Thus, another way to study civil society is to look at the discourse (or symbolic actions) generated by civil society actors.

There is a long tradition of rhetorical studies in public relations. Scholars such as Bostdorff (1992), Elwood (1995), Crable and Vibbert (1995), Hearit (1994), Heath (1992), and Heath, Toth, and Waymer (2009) have applied rhetorical theory and methods to case studies of organizational discourse. Their work provides a framework for examining how corporations, government, and activists have participated in civil society. By looking at the discourse of advocacy, we can see civil society enacted. Civil society is a normative theory as well as a positive theory. Civil society is enacted by humans as individuals and organizational members and, thus, reflects all the baggage that accompanies human agency.

Critiquing Civil Society Practices

There have been some critiques of a public relations perspective of civil society, and that dialogue has provided a valuable opportunity for debate about what civil society is and is not. Dutta-Bergman (2005) has equated civil society efforts in the form of Western development aid with the continued domination of nations in the subaltern. Through case studies of U.S. interference

with governments across the world, Dutta-Bergman warned that civil society efforts may not be so civil. That may be true, but it is also important to remember that not all voluntary associations are good and not all externally supported civil society efforts are bad. The interference of one government in the internal affairs of another country is clearly wrong, and when we view civil society as the creation of discourse in the marketplace of ideas, then we have “a rationale and method for critiquing instances of antidevelopment and imperialist messages and activities” (Taylor, 2009, p. 88). A public relations approach to civil society can actually diminish the imperialistic or self-serving intentions of elites.

Future Directions for Civil Society Theory

Recent research that embodies a cocreational perspective has helped shape the future of public relations research. Ferguson (1984) and Broom et al. (1997) explicated a relational approach to public relations, where the existence and strength of relationships become the focus of study. Civil society is premised on interorganizational relationships among the societal partners noted in Table 1.1. A public relations approach to civil society allows us to understand how cooperative relationships help shape, change, and sustain communities ranging from small collectives all the way up to the nation-state.

If we accept public relations as the use of communication to negotiate relationships among groups (Botan, 1992), then we should also accept that any group could engage in public relations communication to build or change relationships. The outcome of any communication and relationship-building activities is open to negotiation. Rhetoric provides the discourse and the images, whereas public relations provides the process through which discourses and images are shared, negotiated, contested, and possibly resolved. Taylor (2009) argued that *meaning making and relationships* enact civil society. The social capital that is created by shared meaning

and relationships among civil society partners makes society a better place to live.

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a third way for understanding the societal role of public relations. The functional approach and a cocreational approach to public relations together create a society where people, groups, and organizations have the desire and agency to make their community/society/world a better place to live. Information (from the functional approach) and rhetorical discourse and symbolic action (from the cocreational approach) are possible when they exist within a civil society. One answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter is that public relations' role in society is to create (and re-create) the conditions that enact civil society.

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