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The Reflective Practitioner: Critical
Theory and the Professionalisation of PR

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The Reflective Practitioner: Critical Theory and the Professionalisation of PR

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to outline the relevance that critical theory has for the practice of public relations and the professional formation of its practitioners. The article provides an overview of one of the key theoretical perspectives articulated in the political economy approach to communication - that of the relationship between powerful elites in society and media professionals. The author seeks to explore the hypothesised relationships said to exist between power brokers in society and the 'organs of cultural production' - with particular emphasis on media relations. The author examines this dynamic as articulated in the literature and explores its relevance to public relations practitioners.

Arising from some of the issues raised by the political economy analysis of public communication, the author will reflect on some of the ethical challenges that face the Public Relations industry with specific reference to media relations. In this context, the author will propose a professional orientation for public relations practice that is informed by theory and characterised by research and reflective practice.

In summary, the author seeks to describe a model for the professionalisation of public relations practice consistent with a research process leading to credentialism and formal professional accreditation.

'Practice without theory is blind - Theory without practice is sterile'

As a public relations educator involved in the management and delivery of Ireland's most senior qualification in the field, I am keenly aware of a number of characteristics that mark PR apart from other disciplines and areas of study. Unlike what are often termed 'pure' sciences or highly abstract and theoretical fields, PR is an eclectic practice that is applied in nature. For PR therefore, as an applied art or science, there is a compelling requirement for strong links between the third level institution, variously referred to as 'academe' or the 'academy' and the industry itself.

One of the great strengths of the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland is the long established linkage between the various institutes and the professions and industry. In DIT for example, there are long standing relationships between the institution and the professions of Architecture, Engineering, Journalism and Catering - among others. Through consultation and contact with various industry representatives and professional associations, DIT has kept pace with sectoral requirements and has consistently produced graduates ideally placed to make a positive contribution to their chosen professions.

A key feature of this strategy has been the recruitment of lecturing staff with a mix of industrial and theoretical expertise. In my own case, this includes a number of years appointed as an Army Press Officer (Captain) in the Public Relations Section of the Chief of Staff's Branch of the Irish Defence Forces. With responsibility for the public profile of the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps, at home and abroad - in seventeen different countries world-wide - the job of press officer provided the author with a steep learning curve on the day to day realities of public relations practice. This was especially so during a difficult period for the Defence Forces including the advent of the so-called 'Army Deafness Claims' and at a time of re-structuring and down-sizing.

In parallel with these experiences, the author gained a number of theoretical insights into individual, organisational and societal communication at Micro, Macro and Meta levels. These theoretical insights were gained through the completion of a Masters Degree in Communication in Dublin City University (1993 - 1995) followed by a PhD and Doctoral Thesis (1996 - 2000).

Exposure to the literature on communication theory and research dovetailed with my own professional experience and provided me with a thorough knowledge of what constituted international best practice in relation to all aspects of internal and external communication and PR. This exposure complemented my own professional practice and provided an invaluable extra dimension to my military service. In short, the process of reading, researching and advocating excellence across all communication repertoires facilitated critical reflection, analysis and professional development. The benefits of such a process are not just personal. The insights gained through research and reflection can be harnessed to benefit the workplace and society as a whole. This reflects the pro-social nature of action research and reflective practice.

This experience informs the research programme for the MA in Public Relations offered by DIT. It is an aim of the course to ensure that students of PR are familiar with the latest developments in best practice for the industry as articulated in industrial and academic literature. It is also an aim of the course to equip students with the skills to carry out independent research and to inculcate within them the tendency towards critical reflection and a constant striving towards excellence. This article seeks to describe the manner in which one strand of communication theory - contributing to reflective practice - enhanced the author's understanding of one aspect of PR practice - media relations.

The Political Economy of Communication

As described previously, whilst a practitioner engaged in active research, several strands of communication theory appeared relevant to a task analysis of Public Relations. One such area, the political economy of communication, seemed especially relevant.

Broadly speaking, the political economy of communication encompasses a body of literature that explores the linkages between communication and power. Power brokers are listed as government (law/policies), the armed forces, the police and judicial systems which have the power to enforce law and policy, public servants and state bodies and institutions - and last but by no means least - business and corporate interests in the commercial or private sector. The study of how these power brokers interact is often referred to as political economy (Mosco, 1996). Boyd Barrett, (1995:186) defines the political economy of communication as follows:

The term 'political economy' in communication research has a broadly 'critical' signification, often associated with macro-questions of media ownership and control, interlocking directorships and other factors that bring together media industries with other media and with other industries and with political economic and social elites ... Secondly, political economy also has an interest 'in examining the social whole or the totality of social relations that constitute the economic, political, social and cultural fields'. Thirdly, it is committed to moral philosophy, having an interest in social values and moral principles.

Boyd Barrett's definition of the political economy of communication emphasises three main points. Firstly, it goes some way towards defining the terrain navigated by public relations professionals – the interface between 'industrial, political, economic and social elites'. Secondly, it highlights the manner in which the profession seeks to facilitate such a complex set of relationships - 'the totality of social relations that constitute the economic, political, social and cultural fields'. Thirdly, it articulates a commitment to ethical conduct - 'committed to moral philosophy, having an interest in social values and moral principles'. This is a commitment which is vital to the future of the profession of public relations.

One of the emphases within the political economy approach is an examination of the role that media relations play in negotiating 'the totality of social relations that constitute the economic, political, social and cultural fields'. In other words, the literature seeks to describe the anatomy of the relationship between power brokers in society and media professionals. The literature hypothesises that powerful stakeholders in society, from government, to political parties and business interests will seek to harness the power of the media in order to exercise a form of social control. This social control is not achieved coercively but through attempts at extending the 'value consensus' or 'hegemony' defined by elites. Mosco, (1996) observes that for the preservation and extension of hegemony, control of the media by powerbrokers is desirable. Downing (1995:485) reiterates the manner in which hegemonic 'control' is exercised in a subtle manner through the broad spectrum of organs of cultural production. He states, "(Hegemony) ... as used by Gramsci ... signifies all the means of ideological leadership and dominance ... operat(ing) through such institutions as education, religion and the media but not with any absolute or permanent force".

In the case of media relations, the most common manner by which such control is exercised is via attempts on the part of institutions and organisations within society to achieve 'primary definition' (Hall, 1978) in the media. This normally involves identifying and targeting industry relevant media professionals and furnishing them with an ample supply of 'expert' and 'authoritative' news copy. Thus for example, in the case of the Defence Forces, crime and security correspondents were targeted for supply with details of current military operations at home and abroad – particularly those high in news value. Therefore, an organisation such as the Defence Forces, with constant and privileged access to what media professionals would consider premium news content is ideally placed to maximise a potentially mutually beneficial relationship with the media.

This optimum operating environment was achieved during my own tenure in the Defence Forces Press Office, where access to military-related international, national and local news stories was proactively facilitated. For example, during the period 1998 – 2000, Defence Forces personnel were in a position to give privileged access to and eyewitness accounts of international incidents such as NATO's Serb Air Campaign in 1999, the storming of the UN compound by pro-Jakarta militia in East Timor that same year and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon in 2000. At national and local news levels, the Defence Forces were able to provide access and information in relation to countless Search and Rescue operations mounted by Air Corps personnel throughout the State - and all manner of security stories related to arms finds, weapons seizures and the discovery of unexploded ordnance. All of these

news stories, by their very nature, were high in news value and often at the top of the news agenda. (For 'News Values', 'News Agenda', see Hodgson, 1993:9; Allen, 1999:62-3; Fiske, 2001: 283-4) Providing media professionals with access to and information about such stories allowed the Defence Forces to achieve 'primary definition' in relation to its core tasks. It also functioned to divert attention from peripheral and often negative issues affecting the Defence Forces.

The literature takes a very dim view of such a dynamic. This mutually beneficial relationship, according to Hall (1978:59) "places the media in a position of structured subordination to the primary definers". The 'primary definers' or those who would achieve 'primary definition' therefore are those who have "privileged access to information" (Ibid: 59). In this scenario, the media, reliant on the information provided by the state institution assume a "secondary role in reproducing the definitions of those who have privileged access". (Ibid: 59) This is especially so in an era of digital communication with increased pressure on media professionals to satisfy news deadlines in a highly competitive and time-sensitive environment. This environment is what Schiller, (1992) and Herman and Mc Chesney (1998) refer to as the 'mode of production'. In other words, the literature hypothesises that the operating environment within which media professionals now find themselves - with increased competition for access to privileged sources - functions to subordinate the media's role as primary definers. In other words, the literature on the political economy of communication constructs a legitimate PR practice - the strategic management of a core component of public relations - as inherently problematic. Grunig and Grunig's definition of such PR activity is in contrast to this position, describing such activities as legitimate and ethically sound.

The results of our research ... confirm the importance of strategic public relations in effective organisations: involvement of public relations in strategic management consistently was the best predictor of excellent public relations. This theory leads directly to two of the characteristics of excellent departments: public relations is involved in organisational strategic management, and public relations is managed strategically. (Grunig and Grunig, 2000:304)

The extent of this practice is probably reflected to some extent in the lament of many journalists that they find themselves more and more dependent on PR professionals or what are often termed 'spin doctors' for accurate and timely information. This dependency has also been observed in the literature. Commentators such as Fiske (1996) have identified the manner in which the requirement for instant reportage has forced the media to rely on 'official' spokespersons and sources of information. This has led to a situation where the media are described as "marvellous – they were prepared to be fed any information". (Fiske, in Rolston and Miller, 1996:50) The literature tends to be very negative in its description of this relationship between journalists and valued sources – particularly official ones. Commentators such as Keeble (2000: 43-4) further emphasise the literature's focus on the negative aspects of this dynamic;

At the heart of journalism lies the source. Becoming a journalist to a great extent means developing sources. As a journalist you need to know a lot: where to go for information and who to ask. And for career development, contacts are crucial ... Media research suggests journalists use a remarkably limited range of sources.

Journalists dependent on a limited number of privileged sources and operating in a time-pressured environment would appear to place them in an unequal power relationship with in-house sources, spokespersons and public relations practitioners engaged by 'power brokers'. In the nineteen-nineties, the levels of primary definition being achieved by government agencies and spokespersons in the west led some commentators such as Kellner (2001: 199-200) to describe the media as simply "conduits for government policies and actions".

In relation to the military, and in particular the manner in which the US and British military managed the press during the Gulf War of 1991, one commentator described their media relations technique as 'baroque' with journalists becoming 'unpaid employees of the Pentagon'. According to Taylor (1992:266), the manner in which the military as a power broker in society - the extension of political will - had managed to seamlessly coalesce 'news' coverage with 'primary definition' reflected the manner in which "the new world order and the new world information order had merged into one". Some would argue that this has been emphasised even further with the role played by 'embedded' reporters in the recent invasion of Iraq.

My own professional experience as a military spokesperson however does not confirm the negative assumptions contained within the literature in relation to public relations practitioners, journalists and a hypothesised 'unequal power relationship'. In my own experience as a military press officer, I never once encountered a journalist in either the print or electronic media who would willingly abandon his or her critical faculties in exchange for access or information. Indeed, I would say that contrary to the negative dynamic implied in the literature, the practice of facilitating access in the hope of enhancing mutual understanding between the organisation and its stakeholders and wider publics was an entirely appropriate and ethically sound exercise. This was especially so – an imperative – given the gulf of understanding that had opened up between a valid social institution (the Defence Forces) engaged in pro-social activities (defence of the state and international peace-enforcement and humanitarian work) and an audience (tax payers) who were unsure of the mission and role of the organisation.

Conclusion

This article has sought to highlight the links between normative critical theory, professional practice and the future of public relations. The literature on the political economy of communication purports to provide a rigorous ethical and theoretical framework within which to gauge relationships between journalists and public relations professionals. Despite the overtly negative emphasis within the literature - hypothesising for the most part that public relations professionals are manipulators of news - the literature on the political economy of communications does provide a 'moral compass' against which journalists and PR practitioners can evaluate their professional practice.

In other words, as articulated by Mc Chesney, (1998:8);

The political economy of communication ... can probably be distinguished from all other forms of communication research by its explicit commitment to participatory democracy. Research is driven by a central premise drawn directly from classical democratic political theory: the notion that democracy

is predicated upon an informed participating citizenry and that a political culture typified by an informed citizenry can only be generated in the final analysis by a healthy and vibrant media system. Accordingly the political economy of communication has a strongly normative critique of the ways in which state policies and the methods by which media ... serve this 'democratic function'.

Mc Chesney refers to 'professional journalistic ideology' as being essential to the survival of the profession of journalism. This challenge to journalism, in my view extends logically to public relations practitioners. In recent times, the greatest challenge facing the public relations industry in Ireland would appear to be one of credibility. PR practitioners are at times regarded in the public domain in Ireland with outright suspicion - even hostility. It is ironic that a profession so concerned with reputation and issues management should suffer itself so comprehensively in these areas. The ongoing work of the Tribunals in Ireland will no doubt continue to damage the reputation of PR professionals in this jurisdiction.

The challenge for the PR profession is to acknowledge the claims and counter claims focussing on integrity and credibility contained within these wider debates and as articulated in the literature on the political economy of communication. The controversies highlighted in the literature with reference to media relations and issues management can be extended to other areas of activity engaged in by PR professionals including public affairs and lobbying, sponsorship and community public relations. The route towards reflective and ethical practice as proposed at the outset of this article - through reading, research and striving for excellence consistent with international best practice - offers a solution to the challenges facing the profession.

In other words, there is an onus on the profession to explicitly articulate and demonstrate the contribution that public relations practitioners make to 'participatory democracy' and the positive 'democratic function' articulated by Mc Chesney. Many PR professionals reading this article will be all too aware of the pro-social and ethical contributions they make to Irish society. The challenge is to communicate this to a wider public and to distance the industry from peripheral groups who bring the profession into disrepute. The route to an explicitly demonstrable 'professional PR ideology', I believe lies in credentialism through formal qualification at third level and in accreditation with self-regulating and robust professional associations such as the PRII.

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