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# Globalization, Pluralization, and Erosion: The Impact of Shifting Societal Expectations for Advocacy and Public Good

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### Abstract

This research contributes to the theoretical conceptualization of public advocacy in several ways: First, this research positions the emergence of corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues within a broader multidisciplinary conversation about shifting societal expectations surrounding the roles of business and governments in a democratic society. This research explores the implications for democracy as a public good when business plays an increasingly central and powerful role as decision-makers and problem-solvers of the most important issues facing society. Next, this research discusses how globalization, pluralization, increased corporate power and pressures, and the erosion of traditional institutions contribute to a politicized corporation. Finally, this research concludes with theoretical propositions for moving forward with an advocacy and public interest communications research agenda.

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## Introduction

The emergent area of public interest communications as a scholarly and professional pursuit is receiving increased attention, as evidenced by the launch of the *Journal of Public Interest Communications*. However, the concept of public interest communications—public relations as advocacy for the greater good—is not new (Downes, 2017; Fessman, 2017). Indeed, extant literature from across disciplines contributes to this burgeoning discipline that exists at the

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intersection of strategic communication and positive societal change through behavioral outcomes and policy impact.

In efforts to advance the theoretical conceptualization of public advocacy, this research specifically addresses research surrounding corporate social advocacy (CSA), corporate activism, political Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), or social issues management as the concept has been termed across multidisciplinary bodies of research (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2014; 2015; Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Scherer, 2018). In short, CSA refers to the public relations function in which firms and/or their CEOs intentionally or even unintentionally “align themselves with a controversial social-political issue outside their normal sphere of CSR interest” (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288). For instance, after a gunman left 17 dead on February 14, 2018, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, student survivors started a movement. In response, many companies—ranging from insurance to banking to transportation to retail—have publicly cut ties with the U.S. National Rifle Association by deciding to no longer offer the association’s 5 million members discounted rates for services. For-profit firms, receiving pressure from engaged consumers, employees, and activist groups, have become powerful forces in the movement, using corporate power to advocate for federal gun-control legislation.

This research contributes to the theoretical conceptualization of public advocacy in several ways. First, this research positions CSA within a broader multi-disciplinary conversation about shifting societal expectations surrounding the roles of business and governments in a democratic society (i.e., the business-government-society dynamic). This research explores the implications for democracy as a public good when business plays an increasingly central and powerful role as decision-makers and problem-solvers of the most important issues facing society. Next, this research discusses how globalization, pluralization, increased corporate power and pressures, and the erosion of traditional institutions contribute to a politicized corporation. Finally, this research concludes with theoretical propositions for moving forward with an advocacy and public interest communications research agenda.

## Literature review

The often discordant relationship between business and society is well documented over time. Businesses have traditionally emphasized stockholder models of profit maximization, which seem logical, but often lead to misconduct. “Financial scandals, human rights violations, environmental side-effects, collaboration with repressive regimes and other problematic issues have not only threatened the reputation of the involved firms but provoked critical questions about the societal role of business in general” (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006, p. 71). Over time, increased distrust and skepticism surrounding multinational firms, in particular, have led to increased pressure from activist groups and consumers. Indeed, “companies with world-spanning networks have become the potential enemies of public interest” (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006, p. 72).

Stockholder models fundamentally overlook stakeholder interests, which may be key to profit maximization goals. On the other hand, stakeholder models of CSR emerged to address stakeholder needs. Yet, some 50 years of corporate recognition of social responsibilities have passed and anti-business sentiment and distrust remain pervasive.

There is little dispute that businesses have a responsibility to society; however, what those responsibilities entail is a debate that varies by discipline, theory, and practice. Business and society are frequently at odds in this dynamic process of negotiation. Most businesses engage in non-controversial socially responsible activities such as environmental protections (i.e., recycling programs), ethical business practices (i.e., fair trade), and philanthropy (i.e., donating company time and money to charity). Companies that meet (or exceed) societal expectations of responsibility are legitimized by the stakeholders who allow them to exist. Swanson (1999) argued, “The link between business and society is inherently normative because it seeks to explain what corporations should or should not do on behalf of the social good” (p. 506). The potential alternatives are activist protests, boycotts, labor strikes, negative media attention, NGO pressure, and government intervention, just to name a few. Thus, it is clear why companies seek to meet societal expectations.

CSA has emerged alongside shifting societal expectations about the roles and responsibilities of business and government. Traditionally, the public targeted government to legislate business; today, the public increasingly targets business to influence government. Indeed, we are in an era of engaged consumerism fueled by globalization. Industry trend research demonstrates that a majority of people in the United States believe that corporations should act to address issues facing society (81%) and have a responsibility to do so (71%) (Global Strategy Group, 2018). More so, millennials, who will make up 75% of the workforce by 2025, are motivated by compassion and innovation, not by money. More than 50% of millennials said they would take a pay cut to find a workplace that matches their values, and a majority (75%) believed the business world is too focused on its own agendas, rather than improving society (Deloitte, 2015). That companies increasingly expend resources and engage in risk by taking public stances on issues that transcend the particular interests of a single organization (Fessman, 2016) and are often aimed at societal-level outcomes (e.g., behavioral and policy outcomes) signals a change in our traditional understanding of democratic processes for public good. If this is true, perhaps it is also an opportune time to revisit guiding public relations theories, move beyond theoretical puzzle solving, and embrace new theories and concepts for scientific revolution (cf. Kuhn, 2012). Scholars have long called for a postmodernist paradigmatic shift in how contemporary public relations will come to be understood.

Theoretical development in public relations is at a crossroads because scholars have neglected to embrace postmodernist theories that have evolved scholarly thinking about organizational strategy and communication in related disciplines (e.g., management) (Gower, 2006). In a historical reflection, Gower (2006) explained, “Business in the United States was considered a private affair until the last decades of the 19th century when huge corporations appeared, facilitated by new industrial technologies, social Darwinism, and the economic

doctrine of *laissez-faire*” (p. 183). However, the Progressivist Era from the 1890s to the 1920s brought about government regulation and state control of corporations. “Corporations needed to show the public that they were legitimate, and the only way to do that was through communication with the public” (Gower, 2006, p. 183). Arising from a need to meet stakeholder expectations in the legitimation process, Starck and Kruckeberg (2003) outlined how CSR emerged shortly thereafter. Following World War II in 1945 and amid concerns that corporations were becoming too large, debates about the responsibilities of business to society garnered mainstream attention. Economist Milton Friedman (1962) famously argued that the only responsibility of business to society is to increase profits. Yet, by the 1980s the focus had shifted to how CSR should be practiced (and potential competitive advantages for that practice), not if it should be practiced. Even capitalists argued that if engaging in CSR initiatives worked for the company’s economic self-interest, then it was justifiable.

L’Etang (2009) stated, “PR arises at points of societal change and resistance” (p. 609). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, during a time of much activism, social change, anti-corporate sentiment, and a desire to legitimize for-profit corporations, the public relations field evolved alongside CSR. Scholars have even suggested that public relations is CSR (Clark, 2000; Park & Dodd, 2017). L’Etang (2009) further posed, “The expansion of organizational PR after the end of World War II can be interpreted variously as a modernist project. . . as a consequence of democracy and a free market; or as the consequence of, or as the trigger for, globalization” (p. 614). The growth of public relations may be inexorably traced to notions of power and control in the Western world. As a consequence of democracy and a free market, it can be argued that public relations evolved to serve the will of the people (democracy) in a capitalist (free market) economy that operates by the way of competition, not government intervention. It also may be argued that public relations evolved as an agent for the legitimation of corporate power and competitive advantage alongside the dominant global economic system: capitalism. Democracy and capitalism rest on shared ideals of equality in political decision making and market capability. Capitalism was triggered by and intensified processes of globalization. More so, periods of globalization are associated with the spread of democratic ideals.

Since the early 1990s, scholars increasingly have contended that we are in a postmodern age characterized by the exercise of power on a global scale by actors outside our traditional notions of nation-bound, sovereign governments. “Today’s public relations practice is fluid and complex” (Gower, 2006, p. 185) because multinational corporations are not bound by the borders or governments of single nation-states. Yet, a dearth of postmodernist scholarship and theory for public relations remains (Holtzhausen, 2000; McKie, 2001; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2003). Gower (2006) argued that despite our claims as “defender of democracy while ignoring our antidemocratic potential,” public relations scholars do not make clear the role of public relations in a democracy, “nor do we incorporate the political thought literature that could generate more philosophical discussions” (p. 184). Further, public relations literature “has a corporate and technocratic bias, despite the significance of the political aspects of organizations—the way in

which they exercise power both through elite networking in the international business and political spheres as well as through economic power” (L’Etang, 2009, p. 613).

Dominant theoretical frameworks (two-way symmetry, excellence theory) have been criticized widely by postmodernists, critical/cultural theorists, and international scholars for an overemphasis on corporate function, failure to address power and power disparities, and a Western, ethnocentric worldview. Postmodernist theory may challenge traditional public relations theories through critical reflection on the societal role of public relations professionals and their impacts on our world. Holtzhausen (2000) posed:

The postmodern public relations practitioner will indeed serve as the conscience and change agent of the organization. Public relations has a role to play in challenging the dominant worldviews and practices of the organization when these are perceived to be unjust. The role of public relations should be to continuously demystify the organization and its practices and transform it into a more democratic institution. A democratic institution will consistently communicate openly with its publics and will be prepared to change itself in that process. The necessity of continuous change for survival is no longer questioned. It should be the responsibility of the public relations function to create opportunities for dissent, for opening up debate without forcing consensus, to create possibilities for change. (p. 105)

## Globalization and shifting societal expectations

A snapshot of democratic society today may demonstrate a transitional state where public expectations of government and business are shifting. The business-government-society dynamic is changing. The modern landscape of public expectations of business and government legitimizes, and perhaps necessitates, corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues. This dynamic has, similarly, given rise to attempts to redefine the public relations field or separate out public relations activities aimed at the public good as public interest communications (Fessman, 2016; 2017). Of particular importance to theory building, the shifting roles of business and government in society—and public relations as a part of it—are tied to the present state of democracy, a public good. For instance, Brunner (2017) argued that public relations may shape the emergent area of public interest communications by promoting dialogue and community building in support of a failing United States democracy. Thus, this research argues that the emergence of CSA is defined by an increasingly globalized, postnationalist society where multinational corporations derive power and pressure by way of their ability to transcend sovereign government structures. This research explores the implications for democracy as a public good when business plays an increasingly central and powerful role as decision-makers and problem-solvers of the most important issues facing society.

## Globalization

Businesses and communicators today operate in an internationalized postnationalist society. Traditional nationalist ideology of the business-government-society dynamic is focused on the expression of power, resources, identity, culture, and governance at the national (sovereign nation-state) level. Political, social, and economic systems are characterized and studied by political philosophers, sociologists, management, and economics scholars through the lens of globalization. Our increasingly globalized political, social, and economic processes have led scholars to challenge traditional models of the sovereign nation-state, proposing that modern society is best characterized by the dynamics of international, interdependent nation-states (Breen & O'Neill, 2010; Habermas, 2001).

Scholars have increasingly contended that we are in a postnationalist age. “They argue on the basis of empirical, theoretical, and normative reflections that the high-point of the nation-state is over and that the time has come to celebrate the rise of new sociopolitical formations and possibilities” (Breen & O'Neill, 2010, p. 2). Postnationalism highlights the exercise of power on a global scale by actors outside our traditional notions of nation-bound, sovereign governments. The postnationalist ideology is not the antithesis of nationalism, but instead argues that the nation-state and nationalist ideology are superseded by internationalization and postnationalism. Two key arguments have driven the modern conceptualization of a postnationalist society (Habermas, 2001). First, external forces of globalization have shifted the locus of power from the nation-state to the multinational level. Second, the legitimacy and authority of the nation-state is weakened internally by the increasing pluralization of modern societies (Koopmans & Statham, 1999). Scherer and Palazzo (2011) explained that management and economics scholars operate from the assumption that businesses exist to create profit, and state systems exist to provide public goods. However, the process of globalization has led to new interdependencies, risks, and opportunities for business, which necessitates new theories to explain our world.

Globalization is “a process of intensification of cross-border social interactions due to declining costs of connecting distant locations through communication and the transfer of capital, goods, and people” (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011, p. 901). Traditional theories of the role of business in society reflect a “strict and deeply engrained separation of economic and political responsibilities” (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006, p. 76). However, the authors argued, “In our view, the politicization of the corporation is an unavoidable result of the changing interplay of economy, government, and civil society in a globalizing world” (p. 76).

Breen and O'Neill (2010) argued that globalization rests on three key observations that obstruct conventional nationalist ideology: the centrality of global capitalism and multinational corporations, threats to well being beyond the scope of single nation-states (e.g., climate change), and the rise of transnational non-governmental organizations (e.g., the World Bank). Today, multinational corporations are drivers of international trade, manufacturing, and financial markets. Multinational corporate actors are not bound by the borders or governments of single nation-states. “The result is that accelerated capital flows and increased locational competition

make it ever more difficult for nation-states to control their own economies or maintain their welfare systems” (Breen & O’Neill, 2010, p. 3). Globalization creates challenges for political decision making that exceed the capabilities of any single nation-state (Wolf, 2008), and pressure from NGOs has led multinational companies to increasingly perform in the traditional role of the state (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). That is, companies increasingly perform the role of provider of public goods because “the areas in which a state’s political community can make decisions autonomously are decreasing” (Archibugi, 2004, p. 443). The modern landscape offers vast potential for global standard setting to occur separate from any participation on the part of the nation-state, much less primacy of the nation-state.

Researchers have argued that, in the context of recent shifts in business-society relations, businesses take over many of the roles and actions traditionally associated with governments (Hertz, 2001; Matten & Crane, 2005). Matten and Crane (2005) argued that in most industrialized societies, people are entitled to three categories of rights (as identified by Marshall, 1965) that are protected by governments of the nation-state: civil, social, and political. Social rights refer to education, healthcare, and general welfare. Civil rights refer to freedom from third-party abuses and interference, such as property rights, freedom of speech, and free marketplace participation. Political rights refer to the right to vote or hold office, or “generally speaking, entitles the individual to take part in the process of collective will formation in the public sphere” (p. 170).

However, the weakening of power for nation-states has shifted some of the responsibility for protecting public rights away from the government. Corporations largely have taken up that slack. For instance, global technology company Cisco (2018) has made education a core part of its mission “to help solve society’s toughest problems” (para. 1) and in January 2018, corporate executives from Amazon, Berkshire Hathaway, and JPMorgan Chase came together to discuss potential solutions to the healthcare problem in the United States. Together, Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffet, and Jamie Dimon said their firms would create “an independent company that is free from profit-making incentives and constraints” to focus on “technology solutions” for healthcare (Hiltzik, 2018). And, perhaps nothing has been as visible as corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues, termed CSA, like same-sex marriage, transgender bathroom use, gun legislation, immigration reform, climate change, and so on. Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff referred to business as “the third [political] party” (Weber Shandwick, 2015, p. 2). For-profit firms have emerged as protector and promoter of the political agendas of the public on a large scale.

Kruckeberg (1995) predicted that in the era of globalization, the role of public relations would change fundamentally. He prophesied a concomitant world society, driven by technological innovation, where “power and productivity will be based on developing and distributing information” (p. 37). He argued, “Public relations practitioners—if they prove worthy of the task—will be called upon to be corporate, that is, organizational—interpreters and ethicists and social policy-makers, charged with guiding organizational behavior as well as influencing and reconciling public perceptions within a global context” (p. 37). Kruckeberg

incisively forecast that within a globalized world with increasingly heterogeneous values and belief systems (i.e., pluralism), successful organizations would require strategic communication professionals who can articulate, modify, and defend organizational values that inevitably would be challenged. Challenges to organizational values are challenges to organizational legitimacy.

## Pluralism

More so, the legitimacy and authority of the nation-state is weakened internally by the increasing pluralization of modern societies (Koopmans & Statham, 1999). Pluralization is best understood as decreasing cultural homogeneity in social communities and a decline in national identity. The decrease in cultural homogeneity is attributed primarily to processes of migration and individualization (Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2013). An increasingly globalized society gives rise to a diversified public, often with conflicting goals. Kruckeberg (1995) stated, “Existing relationships are being strained, and virtually everyone is being forced into new relationships within social systems that are becoming both increasingly diverse and correspondingly divisive” (p. 37). Holtzhausen (2000) argued that people in postmodern society are less inclined to have permanent relations with a group and more inclined to have short-term relations with a number of groups that identify with similar issues of concern, posing a challenge for public relations theory and practice. Moreover, activist groups are more skilled than ever at making their voices heard via social media, during a time when the public increasingly distrusts traditional media.

Management scholars have begun the conversation about how companies, in a pluralized society, engage in complex decision-making processes and manage tensions among multiple goals and competing values (Mitchell, Weaver, Agle, Bailey, & Carlson, 2016; Scherer et al., 2013). The pluralism of modern times has reignited debates about the responsibilities of business to society. Conventional models of business as holding the singular aim of profit maximization or shareholder wealth maximization persist (Jensen, 2002). Jones and Felps (2013), however, argued for the singular aim of business to be the creation of happiness as a public good. They posed that “the objective of the corporation should be to enhance the aggregate happiness of its normatively legitimate stakeholders over the foreseeable future” (p. 358). Mitchell et al. (2016) suggested that to best contribute to the public good, corporations should reconceptualize as multiobjective organizations that embrace stakeholder interactions as complex processes that present challenges to be managed, such as conflicting goals.

For 17 years, the Edelman Trust Barometer has surveyed tens of thousands of people across dozens of countries about their trust in business, government, media, and NGOs. Perhaps, speaking truth to theory, Edelman’s Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2017) found that globalization is fueling public fear and distrust: 60% of participants were concerned about losing their jobs due to the impacts of globalization; 50% said globalization is taking society in the wrong direction; and 53% said the pace of change in business is moving too fast. Harrington (2017) argued this is a clarion call for businesses to look beyond profit maximization toward participatory models that are not just “for the people but with the people” (para. 7).



## Increased corporate power

Globalization and pluralism have given way to increased corporate power and pressures to engage in the most important issues facing society today. Public participation in political action is increasingly aimed at business, not government. Researchers make clear how the modern era of engaged consumerism has contributed to shifts in societal expectations of business and government. Matten and Crane (2005) claimed, “Whether through anti-corporate protests, consumer boycotts, or other forms of action outside the usual political arena, individual citizens have increasingly sought to effect political change by leveraging the power (or vulnerability) of corporations” (Matten & Crane, 2005, p. 172). Similarly, Palazzo and Scherer (2006) argued that as nation-states have lost power, NGOs have sought to apply pressure to the new owners of power, the corporations.

With power comes responsibility. Palazzo and Scherer (2006) examined the concept of organizational legitimacy (i.e., license to operate). The authors argued that firms must reconsider policies to meet stakeholder expectations that provide a license to operate, and the expectations of business to society have grown beyond basic economic, legal, and moral expectations to include increasingly social-political expectations. Gower (2006) argued that legitimacy may serve as a dominant theory for public relations because organizations exist by public permission, and “without a notion of something being ‘public,’ there is no need for public relations” (p. 183). Indeed, legitimacy theory offers an ontological argument for the profession, as evidenced by public relations researchers (Boyd, 2000; Colleoni, 2013; Massey, 2001; van Ruler & Vercic, 2005; Vercic, van Ruler, Butschi, & Flodin, 2001). Formerly an expectation placed solely on governments, corporations’ license to operate increasingly rests on functioning as the protector, facilitator, and enabler of public goods (Matten & Crane, 2005; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). In this politicized role, corporations meet societal expectations by self-regulating. Because power has shifted from nation-states to multinational corporations, theories that ignore the public good may no longer be sustainable. Businesses must self-regulate because single nation-states have lost power to regulate. Businesses forego using their power for profit-maximization opportunities that could potentially violate stakeholder expectations because violating stakeholder expectations may give rise to negative outcomes and pressures. Scherer and Palazzo (2011) concluded, “Corporations thereby become politicized in two ways: they operate with an enlarged understanding of responsibility and help to solve political problems in cooperation with state actors and civil society actors. Furthermore, with their growing power and through their engagement in processes of self-regulation, they become subjects of new forms of democratic processes of control and legitimacy” (p. 918).

## Erosion of traditional institutions

Our modern era further witnesses the erosion of public trust in traditional institutions such as government and media. Therefore, the legitimacy and power of these institutions to operate is similarly eroded. The Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman, 2017) found that trust in all of the institutions studied—business, government, media, and NGOs—has declined internationally. Notably, however, results found that government and media were the least trusted of the four. Brunner (2017) posed that traditional media institutions have “had their wings clipped by leaders who conflate fact and fiction, thus leaving constituents confused” (p. 46). Indeed, perhaps no time in history has witnessed a greater decline in public trust and the erosion of our traditional guardians of democracy: the media and government. Harrington (2017) stated, “The recent collapse of trust in government and media should serve as a powerful lesson to business of what can happen when institutions become disconnected from the interests and opinions of the people they serve” (para. 12).

U.S. Sen. Jeff Flake (R-Arizona) took to the Senate floor and said that “2017 was a year which saw the truth—objective, empirical, evidence-based truth—more battered and abused than any other in the history of our country, at the hands of the most powerful figure in our government [U.S. President Donald Trump]” (as cited in Tharoor, 2018, para. 2). A 2018 report by Freedom House, a nonpartisan watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world concluded: “Democracy is under assault and in retreat around the globe, a crisis that has intensified as America’s democratic standards erode at an accelerating pace” (Freedom House, 2018, p. 1).

It is worth further consideration here that public relations, itself, may be eroding alongside traditional notions of the role of public relations in politics (e.g., lobbying) and media relations. If trust in government and media is eroding, the implications for public relations theory and practice are many. For instance, Holtzhausen (2000) argued that practitioners of the past might have been obliged to defend their organization’s actions before government, but in a postmodern world, engagement with activist groups is more probable. Again, perhaps it is time for public relations scholars to embrace new theories and concepts for scientific revolution (cf. Kuhn, 2012). L’Etang (2009) suggested:

Any work that uncovers the processes of public communication in our complex postmodern world, and the role of PR in particular, is useful and beneficial to human understanding of this semiprofession and its potential influences in the pursuit of power. This points to the necessity for an empirical turn in the field not based on normative theory or idealistic stances that elaborate what PR ought to be and do. Untangling and making known the intricacies of PR’s relationship to power and revealing the processes and social effects of its contribution to public communication, media shaping, and public understanding are the most valuable tasks that PR academics can now assume. (p. 620)

## Implications for democracy

Globalization and pluralization have changed the environment and expectations for businesses in society. In the postnationalist world, the power of nation-states and traditional institutions is eroding, leaving private actors (i.e., corporations) and civil society actors (e.g., NGOs and activists) to pick up the slack. Companies maintain legitimacy by increasingly serving to create public goods. Specifically, the role of business in the creation of democracy as a public good is important for theorizing surrounding CSA and public interest communications. Current public relations theory does not adequately address the trends of globalization and pluralization, nor does it explicitly examine the role of corporations as political actors in democratic society.

Scholars have suggested that the erosion of power in the nation-state leads to a democracy deficit. Yet, others have argued that conventional models of public-private divide become irrelevant in a globalized society, and theory should be revisited. Breen and O'Neill (2010) posed, "With regard to democracy, if it is the case that nation-states are hemorrhaging sovereignty and national ties are waning, then the only defensible form of democratic rule is one which institutionalizes decision-making procedures across national boundaries" (p. 4). In other words, scholars have argued for a global democracy where a supra-governance system operates (and, perhaps, legislates multinational corporations). Scherer and Palazzo (2011) explained:

The growing engagement of business firms in public policy leads to concerns of a democratic deficit. This assumption refers to the above analysed situation that national governments are partly losing their regulatory influence over globally stretched corporations while some of those corporations, under the pressure of civil society, start to regulate themselves. In other words, those who are democratically elected (governments) to regulate, have less power to do so, while those who start to get engaged in self-regulation (private corporations) have no democratic mandate for this engagement and cannot be held accountable by a civic polity. In democratic countries political authorities are elected periodically and are subjected to parliamentary control. By contrast, corporate managers are neither elected by the public, nor are their political interventions in global public policy sufficiently controlled by democratic institutions and procedures. (p. 907)

Thus, the politicized corporation, and public relations professionals as part of it, contribute to a deliberative democracy where non-state actors engage in political discourse and impact societal outcomes and public policy. Auger (2013) identified explicitly how public relations advocacy contributes to democracy. She stated, "Providing a voice in the marketplace of ideas is inherently democratic in nature as it provides just one voice or idea in a pluralistic marketplace of contradictory, conflicting, and supporting ideas" (p. 370). Scholars seeking to understand alternative approaches to the conventional public-private divide model forward a model of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy suggests that discourse and deliberation for the will of the public are what legitimizes government (as opposed to voting rights in traditional

models). Scherer and Palazzo (2011) argued that deliberative democracy offers a valid approach to understanding how multiple actors, not just nation-states, provide voice for public good.

## Public relations and deliberative democracy

Falkheimer (2006) stated, “Public relations is a communicative structuration force, transgressing the constructed borders in and between organizations and society, that either may reproduce or transform social structures” (as cited in L’Etang, 2009, p. 620). Scholars have addressed the role of public relations in democracy as the creation of public good (Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor, 2000a & 2000b), although not directly (Gower, 2006). Postmodernist approaches to power are particularly necessary to critically examine why modern public relations exists within particular political, historical, or cultural discourses and what are the outcomes for democracy. Yet, critical/cultural approaches are criticized for a lack of immediate practical application for the public relations practitioner (Curtain & Gaither, 2005).

A normative approach, deliberative democracy may also offer a valid path to understanding CSA and public interest communications within globalized models. Although not a unified theory, there remains a common core of assumptions underlying deliberative democracy. “That core is defined by putting communication at the heart of politics, recognizing the need for effective justification of positions, stressing the pursuit of reciprocal understanding across those who have different frameworks or ideologies, valuing of inclusion and reflection, and suspicion of coercive, deceptive, and strategic uses of language” (Ercan & Dryzek, 2015, p. 241). The deliberative process does not seek to reconcile incompatible values, but helps to achieve a shared sense of merit and legitimacy for opposing claims (Schirmer, Dare, & Ercan, 2016). There is no standard way to measure the quality of deliberation because multiple sets of deliberative criteria are proposed by different scholars. For instance, Schirmer et al. (2016) posed that deliberative democracy offers a promising framework for addressing “conflicts characterized by incommensurable values and perceived impossibility of achieving consensus” (p. 290). The authors identified five criteria for assessing the deliberative quality of a contentious environmental conflict: *access to deliberation* means that people must be able to actively participate in the deliberation process; *inclusiveness* requires that not every stakeholder participate in deliberation, but that every stakeholder’s interests are represented; *deliberativeness* is a key measure that seeks to assess the quality of deliberation through an exchange of arguments where actors offer reasons for their proposals; *openness and transparency* invite dissensus, and hence, opinion formation; and, *consequentiality* requires that in order to be deemed successful, deliberation should impact collective decisions and outcomes.

Deliberative democracy may offer one theoretical path forward to understand corporate engagement in political discourse, reframing democracy at a macro-level among shifting expectations about the roles of business and government in society. Further, deliberative democracy may offer a theoretical path forward to understand the more micro-level role of the

public relations professional as representative of the interests of both the organization and stakeholder groups for the organization.

## Moving forward: Theoretical propositions

As has been argued, societal expectations of business have changed. Companies today operate in a complex, heterogeneous environment. Corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues is born of today's postnationalist society. Companies must maintain legitimacy through engagement in political discourse and democracy as public good. Furthering conceptualization about the emergence of CSA and public interest communications, this research concludes by summarizing the aforementioned claims for a theoretical path forward:

1. Companies are increasingly engaged in issues that transcend the interests of their particular organization.
2. Corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues is born of today's postnationalist society.
3. Globalization, pluralization, and the erosion of traditional institutions are redefining the roles of business and government in society.
4. To maintain legitimacy, companies increasingly are expected to engage in social-political discourse and creation of public goods.
5. The shifting business-government-society dynamic has implications for our modern conceptualization and models of democracy.
6. Public relations, as part of this shifting dynamic, must embrace new theories and concepts for scientific revolution that describe the role of public relations in democracy.
7. Multi-objective, participatory models of business require further exploration for creation of public goods.
8. Public relations scholars and professionals are situated in a prime location to explore and advocate for the public good.

## Conclusion

Current public relations theory does not adequately address the trends of globalization and pluralization, nor does it explicitly examine the role of corporations as political actors in democratic society. Given the emergence of CSA and public interest communications—wherein companies increasingly expend resources and engage in risk by taking public stances on issues that transcend the particular interests of a single organization—aimed at public good (e.g., positive behavioral change and policy outcomes), our traditional understanding of the business-government-society dynamic has shifted. Further, all signs point to CSA and public interest

communications, not as a fad, but as a critical trend necessary for organizational survival. In the widely discussed 2018 annual “Letter to CEOs,” BlackRock Inc.—the world’s largest investment company—Chairman and CEO Larry Fink argued that the responsibility of companies to society has grown alongside the failure of governments to prepare for the future. He stated, “The time has come for a new model of shareholder engagement—one that strengthens and deepens communication between shareholders and the companies that they own. . . . Where activists do offer valuable ideas—which is more often than some detractors suggest—we encourage companies to begin discussions early, to engage with shareholders like BlackRock, and to bring other critical stakeholders to the table” (Fink, 2018, para. 14). In short, Fink’s game-changing letter to CEOs makes clear that investors are sensitive to the myriad ways that performance can be evaluated. He makes clear that to remain sustainable investments, companies must communicate with stakeholders—including activists—and identify the ways that they are making positive contributions to society.

This research makes clear several theoretical propositions that may pave the way forward for public relations theory building and conceptualization in our postnationalist society. Public relations scholars and professionals—as boundary-spanners, advocates, activists, managers of CSR initiatives, and strategic communicators—are structurally situated in a prime location during an era of shifting societal expectations to engage in research and practice for the public good.

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