Community, Engagement, and Democracy: Re-envisioning Public Relations and Public Interest Communications through Civic Professionalism

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Article Information	Abstract
	This paper explores how public relations and public information communication can rise above an era of fake news and alternative facts. The author investigates how public relations and public interest communications fit with the concept of civic professionalism as a way of building community and engagement. Civic professionalism is a framework that incorporates the values of education with civic inquiry, reflection, and practical work. Thoughts for how public relations may shape and contribute to public interest communications by promoting dialogue in support of democracy to keep social trust and civic bonds intact are also examined.

Introduction

Public interest communications is at an interesting point in its tenure. As a new discipline it is still being defined. It is still evolving. It is still determining where and how it fits within the realm of communication. However, it is perhaps coming of age at just the right time. With the ever-present phenomena of fake news and alternative facts in addition to attacks on journalism and science, it seems the necessity of public interest communications has come.

In the 20th century, mass communication, such as journalism and broadcasting, created a means for people to take part in civic affairs and to promote dialogue (Raboy, 2006). Such media

were viewed as public institutions that had social, cultural, and educational vocations. They had the purpose of informing citizens, which was a unique service to society (Allison, 1986; Raboy, 2006). However, these institutions have had their wings clipped by leaders who conflate fact and fiction, thus leaving constituents confused. Some of these same leaders have even made calls to curtail freedom of the press and access to information. In essence, it seems these leaders are neither interested in the public interest nor in communicating with the public. However, it could be that they are only interested in leaving the populace *Conwayed*--lost in a world of alternative facts and misinformation of practitioners such as Kellyanne Conway, counselor to U.S. President Donald Trump—rather than engaging in meaningful two-way communication with constituents.

The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (2009) concluded that communicators need to: 1) maximize the availability of relevant and credible information to communities; 2) strengthen the ability of citizens to engage with information; and 3) promote individual engagement with information and the public good. This further gives credence to the role of mass communication in society (Lewis, 2012). These functions have become more challenging to uphold not only due to technology and the economic pressures put upon the fields of mass communication, but by also by the rise of fake news and alternative facts.

Changing economies and new technology threaten the existence of mass communication in the public interest (Black, 2008; Raboy, 2006). Newsrooms have shrunk. News value does not hold the prestige it once had, and technology has allowed everyone the opportunity to report news, whether it is factual or not. In addition, the 24/7 news cycle has made the public hunger for news insatiable. It is no secret that the media and public relations have had increasing problems with credibility (Lambeth, 1988) due to a lack of focus on what is truly important as well as to violations of ethical practice. The public increasingly perceives that communicators are not providing information for the public good, but are instead more interested in soundbites, mudslinging, and gold digging (Black, 2008). Even journalism has seen its stability and authority chipped away (Lewis, 2012). This raises the question: Could public relations serve as a means of protecting and promoting dialogue, public information, and democracy in times such as these? Can public relations be a champion of and for public information communication?

This essay will begin by exploring definitions of the scholarly field of public relations. I take this step because I believe it is important for readers to understand my perspective and bias. Next, I will explain how my research intersects with public information communication. In order to achieve this goal, I will include a discussion of civic engagement, what constitutes a profession, ethics, and civic professionalism. These areas are all relevant to my work as well as to public interest communications. Finally, I will conclude with my thoughts about how public relations may shape and contribute to public interest communications by promoting dialogue, which supports democratic society.

What is public relations?

Public relations is a term used by many and defined in many ways. Some definitions focus on image, others on roles and models. Still others define public relations as opinion and conflict management. As Repper (1992) states, "I have yet to find two public relations practitioners who agree on much of anything--much less the definition of public relations" (pp. 109-110). However, there has always been flux in how the field has been defined and what it does.

Public relations, much like every other profession, can be used for purposes that do not further the public good (Bernays, 1971). Wright (1979) suggests that the field has suffered poor reputation and image in part because many of its earliest practitioners had little regard for ethics or social responsibility. At one time, American public relations focused nearly exclusively on persuasion (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988). By the 2000s, the oversight of relationship building and maintenance came to the forefront of definitions through the work of Bruning and Ledingham, 1999; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997; and others. These scholars asked public relations practitioners and academics alike to consider concepts such as trust, power, satisfaction, and commitment as they related to building relationships among organizations and publics.

In 1971, Bernays suggested that public relations' true intent is to build relationships between organizations and their publics through information, negotiation, and persuasion. He further explains how such a conceptualization of the field (public relations as relationship building) works for societal good by claiming that "[p]ublic relations as a profession is an art applied to a science, in which the public interest and not pecuniary motivation is the primary consideration" (Bernays, 1971, p. 299). Therefore, it seems as though public relations does have, and always has had, a connection to the public interest.

As a public relations scholar, I subscribe to the belief that public relations is about building relationships. However, I also believe public relations encompasses the building of community (see Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988) and dialogue (see Kent and Taylor, 2002). Public relations as a field has an important, complicated, and necessary function, which is to provide information to help bring about discussion and debate. Allowing for the free exchange of ideas, open discussion of those ideas, and equal access to such discussions are the epitome of democracy and are of great importance to public relations--especially when it is practiced ethically. In addition, when the free discussion of ideas happens and all voices have representation, community and relationships are built.

Implications of my research agenda for public information communication scholars and professionals

My work in public relations has naturally brought me to consider ideas and concepts from other fields. This inquiry has, of course, led me to investigate how public relations fits with other disciplines. One area of interest for me has been civic engagement. Civic engagement is working to make a difference in the civic lives of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivations to make that difference. At its most basic, civic engagement describes the activities and interactions between citizens and society that form a partnership, a community if you will (Patrick, 1998). Civic engagement involves promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and non-political processes. Its work can include a wide array of activities and skills that foster social change. Civic engagement can be thought of as activism, much like the protests we witnessed in the early months of 2017 in the United States and around the world.

When people become civically involved, they become informed and involved with discussions, debates, and demonstrations. Therefore, civic engagement can have strong links to not only public relations, but also public interest communications. Through my work with civic engagement, I learned about a related concept, civic professionalism. This idea also holds much promise for public relations and public interest communications due to its focus on professionalism and the responsibilities professionals owe society. However, before I can discuss civic professionalism and its merits, I must first explain professionalism and a perspective of ethics so that the links they have to civic professionalism are clear.

Professionalism

The word profession can be difficult to define, but the term is usually thought of in conjunction with occupations of higher status and vocation, such as doctors, lawyers, and clergy. Structural-functionalists such as Ritzer (1977), Greenwood (1957), Moore (1970), Wilensky (1964), and Vickers (1974) suggest that certain characteristics define and describe a profession. Similarly, it is the lack of these characteristics that keep other occupations from being defined as professions.

Typically, structural-functionalists believe that professions have a theoretical base, a code of ethics, and a professional culture through which one networks. In addition, professionals have clients, not customers, and they are seen to have authority. Finally, a profession has power and privilege granted by the community's recognition of its importance. Typically, it is thought that professionalization is a positive thing from which a professional field can gain, although what a field gains from professionalization is yet to be determined (Allison, 1986).

Sullivan (1995) points out that there is yet one more characteristic of a profession, which is commonly forgotten. That characteristic is a commitment to serve the public. It is my belief that through this forgotten aspect of professionalism public relations can do the most good and prove

its worth. Public relations is a profession. It has a code of ethics. It has an established, yet growing, body of theoretical knowledge. It has a professional culture, which lends itself to networking, and it has the power and ability to serve the public through many means including dialogue, the distribution of information, and relationship building. The example of public relations suggests that it is also possible for the field of public interest communications to follow a similar path to obtaining the status of profession.

All professions have had to answer how they serve the public and, therefore, so must public relations (Bivins, 1993). Since public relations practitioners are expected to act as professionals--meaning that they work in ways that are socially responsible, ethical, and moral (Wright, 1979)--the field's responsibility to the society is explained on an individual level. However, for public relations to transition from a practice to a profession, public relations must explicate its obligation to serve the public good as a whole (Bivins, 1993). Here lies the opportunity for public relations and public interest communications. More research must be done which demonstrates public relations' and public interest communications' contributions to society so that the elevation to profession can happen. Perhaps some ways to further this conversation are continued research and more conversations about ethics.

Ethics

In light of the current divisive state of U.S. society and the proliferation of fake news, alternative facts, and attacks on the fourth estate, public interest communicators and public relations practitioners must heed the many calls for a focus on ethics in communication. Many of these calls have focused on ethics as they relate to the ways in which one does his or her job. But the time has come for calls for ethics and ethical behavior to go beyond upholding professional codes of ethics to calling for general morality and citizenship (Black, 2008). Such a reshaping of how we think about ethics will help public relations and public interest communications demonstrate their value to a fully functioning democratic society.

Public relations and public interest communications ethics must then revitalize the importance of the common good by focusing not only on professional ethics on an individual basis, but on "moral life as a whole" (Christians, 2008, p.3). In other words, professionals must operate under the ethics of citizenship. Similarly, practitioners and academics need to do more than provide information, they must help to create morally literate citizens who are informed and engaged (Christians, 2008; Lewis, 2012). They must also rise above fake news and alternative facts. To help enact such calls to action, public relations practitioners and public interest communicators need to become part of their communities. They need to be active. They need to be civically engaged. They need to become civic professionals.

Civic professionalism

Civic professionalism is based on the work of Sullivan (1995, 2004), Saltmarsh (2005), and Peters (2004). To borrow from Sullivan, civic professionalism joins formal knowledge, professional inquiry, ethical exploration, and work for the public good (2004). Sullivan (2004) defines civic

professionalism as a mutually beneficial relationship between the professional and the public that requires ethical responsibility on the part of the professional to better serve the public good. Sullivan (1995, 2004), Peters (2004), and others argue that it is the responsibility to serve the public good that has developed the least in professionalism as disciplines become more individualistic and as professional degrees come to be valued more economically than socially. They argue that professionalism needs to be redefined to include the aspects of public purpose and civic responsibility within professional identity.

A focus solely on the profession means that practitioners can separate their work from society, meaning that their skills are only available to those who can pay and those who can add to profit. The grander purpose of their work and their responsibility to society are lost. Practitioners should think about not only what they will do in their careers, but also how what they do in their careers affects society and works toward the common good. Civic professionalism acknowledges that there is no separation between career and humanity. If one is a professional, he/she is always working with the public interest in mind.

Learning about civic professionalism uncovered a new vein for my research and pushed me to think about my work as an academic. It made me think about my responsibilities to my students, to the profession of public relations, and to society at large. It made me reflect on who I was as a scholar. It pushed me to work harder to not only instruct my students about ethics, but to also instill a sense of responsibility and accountability in them so they can bring the concepts of civic professionalism to their future places of employment. I want my students to be responsible practitioners who think about issues of public interest and what responsibilities they owe society as public relations professionals. My hope is by populating organizations with alumni who hold these ideals dear, I can help bring about change.

Professionalism is enhanced with the integration of community, experience, and engagement. Therefore, it seems that civic professionalism may be one way by which public relations practitioners and educators cannot only build ethical, engaged, and socially responsible relationships, but can also demonstrate public relations with a focus on the public interest. Civic professionalism may be the perfect vehicle for public relations to find its social responsibility, but more research is needed before such a claim can be made.

How public relations can shape and contribute to public interest communications

To get to the practical, we once more rely on the theoretical. Public relations has many definitions and is often misunderstood. This misunderstanding often leads to incorrect and wrong perceptions of the field. These misunderstandings stand to be further magnified when visible public relations practitioners deal in fake news and alternative facts as a means to *Conway* the press and public. Similarly, public interest communications is still being defined and can bring about confusion

among those outside of the field. Therefore, the time may be nigh for both fields to seize upon the power and influence of social construction to beget comprehension of what is, and what is not, appropriate practice as well as giving the public ways to distinguish between professionals and charlatans. But to do this, we need to shape perceptions and create realities.

Constructing social reality

Social constructionism is a theoretical approach that suggests one's reality and identity are formed through interactions with society (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Scholars who use a social constructionist perspective state that we are the creators, producers, and reproducers of the organizations and cultures to which we belong, and we create meaning and understanding through collaboration with others (Burr, 1995; Carey; 1988; Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). While social constructionists may not define logic, values, or vision in the same way, they do tend to agree on the importance of communication (Gergen & Gergen, 2003).

The first common tenet of social constructionist literature is that communication is at the center of human existence. Communication is necessary for all relationships, societies, and cultures to exist (Carey, 1988; Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Second, communication is a process that has consequences. It is through communication that our understandings and realities are produced (Carey, 1988). Communication creates meaning and existence. Communication is also an ever-evolving process that is sustained by interactions with others; it perpetuates what is right or wrong and what is acceptable or unacceptable (Burr, 1995). Finally, communication upholds our knowledge of the world. Knowledge is based on interactions. How we come to understand something is based on our previous and current context. Therefore, meaning can be redefined (Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009).

Bivins (1993) states that public relations should not only take on the societal obligation of serving the public good, as nearly all professions have, but it should also take the opportunity to redefine the field. He further explains that such a task should not fall to individual practitioners, but to the profession as a whole. Public relations, it seems, needs to educate the public about its purpose, its public responsibilities, and its available services. "The point becomes not *whose* interest is being served, but rather that *all* interests have an opportunity to be served," he notes (Bivins, 1993, p. 121). By being available to all of society, the public good will be served even when practitioners continue to be advocates for clients or organizations. "It is therefore possible for a profession as a whole to serve all society while allowing for individual actions that may, at times, seem not to do so" (Bivins, 1993, pp. 121-122).

Public relations practitioners who are interested in public interest communications and ethics can reinvent others' understanding of the field through their collaboration and interaction with society. If those who are in public relations are responsible, civic-minded professionals, others will begin to understand the field of public relations in such terms. Public relations has the power to reconstruct its reality through meaningful interaction with the community. When public relations practitioners and academics allow for debate and for all voices to be heard, they are working in the public interest. When public relations academics and practitioners provide facts and multiple

sources to counteract the distraction and destruction of fake news and alternative facts, they are working in the public interest. When public relations practitioners and academics are engaged in their communities, they are working in the public interest.

However, these tasks cannot be done by individuals alone. These actions cannot happen in a vacuum. These actions need to be in the public sphere. These actions must be taken on by the profession as a whole so that those outside the field know us as civic professionals, and it is through these actions that we contribute to democracy. We cannot sit back and hope the public will see and understand these actions. Instead, we must take back and write the narrative of responsible public relations ourselves.

Civic professionalism and relationships

When public relations acts as a civic profession trust, and therefore relationships, will be built. Public relations can demonstrate to the world that it wants to be a partner in community building because it allows all voices, even unpopular ones, to be heard and engaged in issues of public interest. By taking this step, public relations will further enhance relationships because commitment to all parties will be demonstrated and all constituents will be satisfied due to the interaction. Furthermore, a balance of power is established. Civic professionalism allows the field of public relations to be a force for democracy.

Bivins (1993) suggests that public relations may be a counterpart to journalism, because it serves the public good by allowing citizens, governments, and organizations a voice thus bringing forth public debate. Similarly, Yang and Taylor (2013) argue that public relations supports the democratic elements of society through the building of relationships and dialogue. In a democracy, every action is dependent on public understanding and support, and, therefore, even dissenting ones need to be heard. Public relations' obligation to society is then to add all voices to the marketplace of ideas (Bernays, 1971). By allowing for discussion and debate about issues of public interest, public relations practitioners and academics serve the public good, engage with community, and own their role of civic professional.

To be a good citizen, public relations must be used to create the forums in which all the voices of society can be heard and sustained. While public relations can take on the role of helping build a community in which dialogue and mutual understanding occur (Valentini, Kruckeberg, & Starck, 2012), public interest communications must provide the means for this discourse and exchange (Heath, Waymer & Palenchar, 2013). If it is recognized that everyone has a contribution to make, and all members of a community have the opportunity to develop ideas, to make suggestions, and to state what simply is not working, the public interest is being served because everyone has the ability to be civically engaged. Everyone has the ability to work toward a common goal--what is best for society and the public good.

Through engagement and professionalism, the field of public relations will able to synthesize what is learned through these conversations to build solutions for society. Through this form of public interest communications, the social reality of public relations becomes one of dialogue for social change. Public relations becomes synonymous with democracy. Only with such action can

the field demonstrate to the world that professional public relations counsel is necessary in a free and democratic society (Bernays, 1971). Public interest communicators, acting as civic professionals, can then build on this momentum created by public relations to achieve the significant and substantial behavior changes necessary to support the public interest issue.

Serving the public interest

Bernays (1971) says that a practitioner's ability and character should always serve the profession and the public interest. He further states that if one does his or her job properly, then both private and public interests will be served because "the ethical obligations of the practitioner are founded on the public interest" (p. 316). Therefore, it seems that the pressures of personal gains and economics can be superseded by the public interest.

It is important for fields such as public relations to explain what obligations they have to society and public good, not only so practitioners recognize and understand those obligations, but also so society does as well (Bivins, 1993). Public relations then must take on the roles of both advocate and mediator to serve the public good, and this obligation must be taken on by both the individual practitioner and the field as a whole. By promoting public debate and allowing all sides to be represented, public relations can serve all and the public interest. By identifying issues of national importance, allowing open and balanced debate through two-way communication, the field would enhance its image while also contributing to the public good (Bivins, 1993). Such work would also help to build community.

The concept of civic professionalism asks one to consider how to move from the either-or dilemma of economic good versus social good into a both-and of progress in the service of the public good (Sullivan, 1995). Sullivan (1995) calls upon professional organizations to live up to their larger obligations and to pay attention to the bigger picture purposes of their fields. These organizations could do more to help members remember that being a professional means that one makes a contribution to society and has a shared commitment to the common good (Sullivan, 1995). One suggestion for making this change happen is to ask professional associations such as the Public Relations Society of America (PSRA) to not only remind members about the importance of ethics, but to also remind them about civic duty. Formal guidance for how to serve the public good and how to communicate in the public's interest could be added to PRSA's Code of Ethics as one way of combating fake news and alternative facts and establishing PRSA's disapproval of such tactics.

Organizations such as PRSA could also help members to see that their careers are truly a calling and help members to find meaning in what they do. Perhaps such organizations could even work in tandem with interested employers to develop outreach programs that focus on how professionalism links practitioners' skills and tasks and how their work adds to the common good, thereby helping employees to understands how what they do in the workplace has an impact on the good of society (Sullivan, 1995). This shared engagement could help members find purpose and self-fulfillment through shared responsibility for public goods such as dignity, justice, and fellowship (Sullivan, 1995).

Public relations must not shirk its responsibility to society--if it does, it cheats the public, which allows it to act as a profession (Bivins, 1993). It also must not allow individuals to define what public service is or continue to allow competence or pro bono work to be the sole means by which the field contributes to society (Bivins, 1993). The time has come (and it is overdue) for public relations to take its rightful place in society by being both mediator and advocate, thus allowing public debate (Bivins, 1993). The field of public relations must recognize its social obligation to society. Public relations must strengthen its code of ethics by explaining what constitutes public service. It must set up a means by which balanced public debate is possible and combat the dangerous world where fake news and alternative facts are accepted as truth.

Conclusion

Sullivan (1995) says the United States has been suffering from a breakdown of social trust and civic bonds. This claim seems no more appropriate than in current times. This decline in cooperation speaks to the urgency of renewing the civic orientation of professionalism. In this time, when the field of public relations falls under greater scrutiny, it is important to remind society of the value of properly-practiced public relations to a functioning democracy. Incorporating the tenets of civic professionalism into the practice of public relations is one way to do just that. When the focus of a field and its practitioners, educators, and students is toward purposeful societal engagement, it is deemed most effective because those efforts are more apparent and visual. Public relations can help society function more effectively when it fosters relationships, shares resources, and promotes understanding (Heath, 2006; Sommerfeldt, 2013). By building trust, relationships, and dialogue, public relations creates the environment from which communities can grow and from which society can develop (Sommerfeldt, 2013). By working for the public good and engaging with community, public relations contributes to society.

When speaking about public relations, Heath, Waymer and Palenchar (2013, p. 278) state, "Inherent in its name is the challenge of the public and the need for relationships that advance collective rather than merely private interests." Therefore, public relations should be at the forefront of building societal relationships through public interest communications and engagement while working toward the public good. Public relations and public interest communications should meet the needs and expectations of not only today's society but also tomorrow's. They must help solve community problems while enhancing engagement and learning through dialogue and public debate while embracing the roles of advocate and mediator. Otherwise, neither public relations nor public interest communications will ever reach its potential.

Public relations should be at the forefront of building citizens and working for the public interest because such service is at its core, After all, Bernays (1971) stated that the public interest is the primary concern of public relations activity. Civic professionalism in our time calls on practitioners to rebuild connections to the community and to think responsibly (Sullivan, 1995).

The time has come for public relations practitioners and public interest communicators to embrace professionalism for the public good.

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