Conceptual Foundations of Public Interest Communications

Jasper Fessmann

University of Florida

Abstract

This article argues that public interest communications (PIC) fundamentally emerges from public relations (PR) scholarship. PIC addresses paradigm anomalies of the excellence and relationship management theories of public relations in the specific case of activism and communication for the common good. It posits that PIC is structurally different from non-profit public relations and examines several key conceptual differences between PR and PIC.

Introduction

"It always seems impossible until it's done."

Nelson Mandela (n.d.)

This article will examine the implications of public interest communications (PIC) as a new academic field of strategic communications to advance social causes and present conceptual demarcations between PIC and public relations (PR). The book chapter, *The Emerging Field of*

Public Interest Communications (Fessmann, 2016), argued that there is a new phenomenon emerging called *public interest communications,* which fulfills key criteria to be regarded as a new academic discipline in mass communications. It is distinct from public relations and other existing communication fields. PIC is defined there as "the development and implementation of science-based, planned strategic communication campaigns with the main goal of achieving significant and sustained positive behavioral change on a public interest issue that transcends the particular interests of any single organization" (Fessmann, 2016, p. 16).

The roots of PIC can be traced back at least as far as the *Am I Not a Man and a Brother* anti-slavery campaign in 1787 (TEDxUF, 2015). However, PIC is emerging as a distinct field in part because of the maturity reached by PR as an academic discipline, which provides a powerful tool set to be applied to other communication areas. PIC takes the sophisticated techniques of the PR discipline and applies them to achieving social change. It is thus very similar to social marketing, which equally applies a sophisticated marketing tool set to achieving social change. PIC, however, is developing unique techniques of its own that will complement previous PR techniques. While strategic public relations has successfully been applied in social change campaigns in the past, specialized PIC expertise will further improve the effectiveness of these efforts.

In regard to social advocacy, PIC's emergence is also directly linked to the decline in journalism's ability to perform its traditional (indirect) social advocacy role. The increased social activism of the millennial generation provides impetus to this development. In a nutshell, PIC is performing a social role similar to advocacy (normative) journalism on issues that are "central to society's wellbeing in matters of health, safety, order, morality, economics, and politics" (Peters & Tandoc, 2013, p. 61). In contrast to journalism, however, it does so by using the academic body of knowledge and skill sets of strategic public relations.

PIC is a process of development and implementation of planned strategic communications campaigns. In this, it is similar to strategic public relations and marketing processes and draws on the full scope of scholarship in these academic fields. A PIC campaign thus has goals, measurable objectives, a limited time frame, and strategies and various tactics.

It shares with PR an emphasis on scientific planning grounded in stringent research methodologies and focused audience analysis. However, the importance of scientific facts in PIC is even greater than in PR. In PIC, it is an ethical imperative to make sure that the solution proposed on a public interest issue is scientifically proven to work. This is critical because poorly-designed PIC campaigns intended to do good may end up causing social and physical harm in ways most PR and marketing campaigns do not. For example, the D.A.R.E campaign, which was intended to reduce drug use among teenagers, ended up increasing the likelihood of later drug abuse by participants (Lilienfeld, 2007; Reaves, 2001; Wagner & Sundar, 2008). With proper research and understanding of the PIC process, this outcome may have been avoided.

In most cases, PIC represents a flip side of corporate social responsibility (CSR). In CSR, considerations other than profit are taken into account, but the focus remains on the company's own interest. PIC reverses the order of these priorities. The public interest has to be the central

goal of the practice for any campaign to be considered a public interest campaign. The campaign may take other considerations into account, but the public interest must come first.

However, enlightened self-interest may well play a role in regards to gaining reputation and making a profit in PIC. Some public relations/corporate social responsibility campaigns thus can be seen as PIC campaigns, if they meet the criteria of achieving sustained positive behavioral change on a public interest issue that transcends the particular interests of their organization. Both PIC and CSR lie on a continuum where good CSR campaigns may indeed be PIC campaigns (Fessmann, 2016). For example, the buy-one-give-one business model of the TOMS shoes company serves the public interest as well as enhances the company's profits.

PIC is often seen as another term for non-profit PR. However, this article argues that this is not the case, or more precisely not *just* the case. PIC is emerging from the field of PR and there is a strong connection between the two disciplines. PR, though, is foremost a tool used to sustain and support an organization (L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Ehling, 1992) rather than the public interest. In contrast, PIC is primarily concerned with public good that transcends the interests of any single organization. The interests of the organization thus are secondary to the public interest.

A helpful analogy is a lawyer engaged in pro-bono work. A lawyer in the course of his or her regular work focuses on the interests of his or her law firm and its clients. However, when engaged in pro-bono work, social good comes first. Analogous to this, PR practitioners may engage in PIC campaigns when these campaigns serve a positive social goal greater than their organization. This occurs most often at non-profit organizations.

Theoretical Background: Need for an alternative paradigm

Public interest communications is inherently an interdisciplinary field. In a future article, I will examine in detail the relationships of PIC to and influences of other academic disciplines. In particular, I will look at the relationships to journalism and documentary film making, marketing, advertising, sociology, and political science. However, PIC is foremost a strategic communications discipline grounded in public relations and deeply based on existing PR scholarship. Therefore, I argue in this article that PIC has emerged because PR scholarship applied to the field of non-profit PR has revealed structural weaknesses. Applying classical PR theory in the public interest context is far less effective than in a corporate PR setting or may even be counterproductive. These structural differences will be examined here.

While there is an ongoing debate about the definition of PR, there are two official definitions by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) that are most commonly used in the United States. The 1982 definition states that "public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other" (PRSA, n.d., para. 2). The most current (2012) definition states that "public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, n.d., para. 4). These definitions demonstrate that PR is primarily concerned with building and maintaining relationships between the organization

and its publics. Both definitions were heavily influenced by J. Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, L. Grunig, Repper, and White's (1992) *excellence theory of public relations* and the *relationship management theory of public relations* (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994), which together have often been regarded as the dominant paradigm of public relations. Key features the PR paradigm are the management function of PR and a mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationship (Ledingham, 2003).

The PRSA definitions do not directly address public interest. However, Harlow's (1976) definition, based on an analysis of 472 definitions of PR in various professional and academic sources, includes the notion of serving the public interest:

> Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; *defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest*; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tool [emphasis added]. (Harlow, 1976)

Corporate PR in particular involves "helping *both* the corporation and its public get more correct pictures of *one another*; it also would employ communication as a tool to help both corporations and citizens solve problems [emphasis added]" (Chaffee & Petrick, 1975, p. 109). As part of the strategic management function, PR often acts internally as an advocate of the public interest toward the management of the organization. But public relations is foremost a tool to sustain and support an organization, "which contributes to organizational effectiveness, when it helps reconcile the organization's goals with the expectations of its strategic constituencies. This contribution has monetary value to the organization" (L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Ehling, 1992, p. 86).

This is even true about CSR in which concerns other than profit-making are factored in. While one does not have to go to the extremes Friedman (1970) did in seeing CSR as only a for-profit function, even in philanthropic approaches CSR is still often seen as part of the economic concept of business as wealth generator and not as a social actor (Piedade & Thomas, 2006). By its very nature, the role of PR is not the role of an external advocate for the public good but that of a mediator. PR tries to strike a balance between the organizational interests and the general public to build "mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, n.d., para. 4).

Consistent with Kuhn's (2012) notion of paradigm development, PR research since 1992 has mainly engaged in puzzle solving of the implications of the *excellence theory of public relations*. While highly fruitful in the areas of non-profit PR and communication used for social change, anomalies have accrued over time. For example, Dozier and Lauzen (2000) point out that mutually beneficial relationships cannot be achieved in cases where the goals of the organization and the opposing external activists are diametrically opposed. For example, consider the conflicting goals of the tobacco industry and anti-smoking campaigners. In such cases, no mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationship can ever be developed and thus *excellent public relations* is impossible.

Similarly, Holtzhausen's (2000) postmodern radical analysis of PR argued that organizations' internal barriers often make two-way symmetry difficult or impossible. She suggested "that public relations should be freed from its narrow definition as organizational communication management" (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 93). Furthermore, she argued that a key implication of radical philosophy for PR is that PR practitioners can (and should) be activists and that some already act that way (Mayhew, 1997).

Accounting for these anomalies is central to PIC. However, instead of trying to free PR from its organizational constraints or trying to reform PR, this article argues that PIC should be seen as a conceptual abstraction distinct from PR or as a new "construct" (Chaffee & Berger, 1987, p. 101). There are several reasons why this is beneficial:

1. According to Glaser & Strauss (1967), using well-established concepts is disadvantageous because it hinders the generation of new categories and concepts, while using new terms is beneficial because they fit theory better.

2. While drawing on existing PR and CSR literature, viewing PIC as a new construct creates a new, less cluttered academic space which will provide opportunity for innovative research. It thus has the advantage of *greater heuristic provocativeness* (Chaffee & Berger, 1987).

3. For a majority of audiences across Western societies, the term public relations has deeply negative connotations such as spin and propaganda. While scholarship has clearly demarcated modern PR from such practices and PRSA has adopted a strong code of ethics, overall these efforts have had limited effect in changing the general negative perception of the field and its practitioners (Callison, 2001; 2004). Indeed, psychological research suggests that given the processes of confirmation bias (Wason, 1960), it may be hard, if not impossible, to change such negative images. This is particularly true if a small minority of practitioners continue to engage in unethical behaviors that negatively impact the reputation of the whole PR field. Thus, starting with a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, is a major advantage, allowing PIC scholars and practitioners to create new, positive associations in key target audiences for the construct public interest communications.

Potential differences between public relations and public interest communications worth examining

The following section examines potential conceptual differences between PR and PIC based on qualitative discussions with scholars and practitioners. As PIC is emerging in large part from PR, the two fields are closely aligned. However, differences can be seen already in the literal meaning of the two concepts (Fessmann, 2016):

*Public relations = **about a relationship with the public***

*Public interest communications = **communication on behalf of the public***
Furthermore:
*Public relations is communication **on behalf of an organization***
*Public interest communications tries to **change organizational structures***

These differences are summarized in Table 1.1. An awareness of these differences will guide changes in campaign choices that may increase the success rate of strategic PIC campaigns.

PR is primarily concerned with building "mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, n.d., para. 4). PIC sees relationships as of secondary importance. It aims at cooperation on the issue, whatever the impact on long-term relationships. Thus, it may even sacrifice current and future relationships to gain one-time cooperation on the issue if required for the success of a campaign. PR also takes the longer view of issues and strives for continual development of relationships and reputation, while PIC hopes to address a social issue and resolve it as quickly and as finally as possible.

Table 1. Comparison of Public Relations vs. Public Interest Communication

Aspect	Public Relations	PIC
Primary Interest	Balance between public and organizational interest	Public's interest first
Goal	Relationship and reputation	Social good
Relationships are	Primary	Secondary, expendable
Primary Stance	Defensive/Protective (but proactive)	Offensive
Status Quo	Maintenance acceptable, though not necessarily desired	Is the problem!
Development	Continuous, long-term	Trigger events
Minimal Acceptable Objectives	Awareness (though attitudinal and behavioral change are major objectives)	Behavior change
Typical Challenges	Media disinterest	Opposition/competition

PR and PIC also differ in terms of their attitudes toward minimum achievements. While PR also aims to achieve behavioral objectives, merely achieving awareness and attitudinal objectives is sometimes acceptable. Such achievements tend to play a dominant role because they do improve the organizational reputation and relationships with key publics. However, in PIC, achieving positive behavioral change is in the final analysis the only valid measurement of the success of a public interest campaign. That is not to say that raising awareness is not important as an initial step in a PIC or PR campaign; indeed it is a critical stepping stone. The problem however is that too

many campaigns stop at awareness, hoping that knowledge of the issue by itself leads to action and/or behavioral change as well. CSR campaigns in PR often have as a key goal to gain positive reputational benefits for the organization regardless of the actual outcome. In PIC reputation is not a primary goal (though credibility is highly important); instead the goal should be outcome oriented. Aiming for just raising awareness poses a significant risk for PIC campaigns, because complacency often quickly sets in once awareness is reached and campaigns often fail because of this. Thus, it is imperative to only make actual behavior change the minimal acceptable objective to reduce the dangers posed by settling for awareness, and thus to fail.

A good example of a campaign that can be regarded as a PIC campaign on most measures but fails this test is the AT&T *It can wait* campaign against texting and driving. The AT&T campaign passes the crucial test of PIC because it tries to address a broader problem of society; its goal transcends the interests of any single organization. It also does not directly benefit financially from the success of the campaign itself. In theory, it might even reduce AT&T's business in the short run because people would not use their services while driving.

The campaign achieved a very high number of media impressions and a significant impact on awareness. However, research also found that while 97% of teens agreed that it is dangerous to text and drive (attitude), 43% continued to do it anyway (AT&T, n.d.). So far, the campaign seems to have had little to no impact on the actual problem (Digiday.com, n.d.). If long-term analysis confirms this, then the campaign would be seen from a PIC point of view as a failure. Nevertheless, the campaign can still be seen as a genuine PIC effort, which failed because it stopped at raising awareness. In contrast, many campaigns that raised awareness and may even caused accidental social good should not be regarded as PIC campaigns in any way. Clarification can be found by comparing the *It can wait* campaign to Dove's *Campaign for Real Beauty*.

The *Real Beauty* campaign has been the "only campaign every one of the Advertising Age [an industry journal] judges cited as belonging on the Top Campaigns of the 20th Century list, and one the panel described as groundbreaking, brave, bold, insightful, transparent and authentic" (Top ad campaigns of the 21st century: Dove campaign for real beauty, 2015). In a campaign style described by Johnston and Taylor (2008) as *feminist consumerism:*

> Dove launched its Campaign for Real Beauty in 2004 using feminist critiques and concerns about beauty ideals to revitalize the Dove brand. Billboard, television, and magazine ads depicted women who were wrinkled, freckled, and pregnant, had stretch marks, or might be seen as fat (at least compared with the average media representation of women). The campaign has generated commercial success (e.g., sales of firming lotion, the campaign's flagship product, far exceeded forecasts), media sensation (see, e.g., People, 2005), and endorsements from celebrities (e.g., Oprah Winfrey), gender scholars (e.g., Susie Orbach), and professional associations (e.g., American Women in Radio and Television). (Johnston & Taylor, 2008, p. 942)

However, Johnston and Taylor (2008) noted that the "Dove campaign does not decenter the role of beauty in women's lives but rather suggests that beauty and self-acceptance can be accessed through the purchase of Dove beauty products" (p. 962) and "because the Dove campaign was

framed in a market context that prioritizes profits and corporate growth, the critique of hegemonic beauty standards could not incorporate a critique of consumerism as an avenue to self-acceptance" (p. 962). In short, the Dove campaign is driven primarily by a profit imperative, not a social good imperative.

Comparing the AT&T and Dove campaigns, there seems to be intuitively a difference in the degree to which both campaigns serve society. It can be argued that only *It can wait* is a public interest communications campaign while *Real Beauty* is not. The differentiation is grounded in the notion that public interest communications needs to serve *interests that transcend the particular interest of any single organizations*. However, the necessary objective criterion to make those distinctions reliable still needs to be developed for PIC in future efforts. These criteria will likely make the distinction between *accidental social benefits* and *intentional social benefits* based on corporate motives. Most schools of moral philosophy, such as Immanuel Kant's (1785) notion of a *categorical imperative*, regard the motive for an act as a critical factor for judging the morality of the act itself regardless of outcome.

While good intentions do not automatically mean that an act has to be regarded as ethical, the reverse is always true. Good outcomes based on unethical intent are always unethical. For example, a hypothetical serial killer who would have killed Adolf Hitler as a child would have saved millions of lives, but that would have not made the act itself ethical. In contrast, Claus von Stauffenberg's and other attempts to assassinate Adolf Hitler as German Führer were unsuccessful but ethical. The same thinking should also be applied to any organization that makes any pretense of serving the public. Thus, when campaigns by organizations do social good but do this only accidentally because the goals are ethically neutral such as profit-making (or worse harmful such as the tobacco industry), these efforts do not indicate public interest communications. Only genuine ethical intentionality is a criterion of PIC. Unfortunately, judging intentionality of an organization's action as a criterion of whether a campaign is in the public interest or not is inherently difficult externally. More research and conceptual work will be required to develop this and other objective criteria for evaluation of genuine PIC campaigns.

In the meantime, a judgment call on the social credibility of the organization is perhaps the best guide practitioners and scholars have to decide on whether or not a campaign should be regarded as PIC: *Does one believe that the organization would continue the campaign if it had measurable positive social impact but would be neutral (or even negative) for company profits?* Applied here, AT&T seems to make a true effort (successful or not) and in some sense the campaign even hurt its business since reducing time customers use their data (while driving) also reduces the company's profit to some degree. In contrast, in my judgment there seems too little indication that Dove had motives other than profit in mind with the campaign and would likely discontinue the campaign the moment it no longer increases sales.

PIC is also different from PR in that it frequently has to deal with strong opposition. PR typically deals with such issues only in crisis communication when the organization has done something wrong. In PIC the strong opposition may actively work against PIC goals and try to prevent discussion of the issue or may even work to prevent research from being done on the issue

in the first place. An example is the *Dickey Amendment* barring U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from *any* research that would *advocate or promote gun control* in spite of the American Medical Association's considering firearm violence *a public health crisis* (Barzilay, Johnson, & Mohney, 2016). By strongly encouraging the *Dickey Amendment*, the National Rifle Association stifled scientific gun violence research in the United States. While this article does not support any specific solution to the gun violence issue, the fact that gun violence (mostly suicide) accounts for about as many deaths per year in the United States as car accidents (Lafrance, 2015) clearly indicates a public interest for research and campaigns to address the issue.

Both PR and PIC share the challenge of media and public disinterest. PIC is also often challenged by active competition by other organizations that advocate an alternative solution to the social problem, often based on a specific ideology.

Differences in research

In addition to the three usual formative research aspects (the situation, the organization, and the publics) advocated in many strategic PR textbooks, PIC adds a fourth aspect: that the approach being advocated for works and avoids doing harm.

There is a strong moral imperative as well as a practical need for the addition of this aspect. That is not to say that PR does not also strive to make sure that its approach works and is done in an ethical way that does no harm (for example, by following the PRSA code of ethics). Nevertheless, the key aspect of campaign evaluation in PR is showing the effectiveness of a campaign.

PIC and PR have very different priorities based on what they are trying to achieve. PR uses evaluation to increase effectiveness by correcting aspects of a campaign. It does this most significantly at the end of the campaign to show success and justify the campaign to management or clients. PIC reverses these priorities: most effort on ensuring effectiveness through systematic research occurs at the beginning. This derives from the necessity of ensuring that the solution/campaign proposed works and does not increase the risk of harm.

First, strategic PR literature and academic training generally assume a corporate or agency organizational structure in which PR is embedded (since this is the reality for most PR practitioners) with either management or client supervision. PR faces pressures to justify campaigns and its efforts, particularly the question of how the campaign affected the bottom line of an organization or, as L. Grunig, J. Grunig & Ehling (1992) put it, showed that PR *has monetary value* to the organization.

PIC faces only the lesser pressure of justifying that the money given to a campaign by organizations or donors was spent wisely. Different group mentalities are involved here: PIC supervision is generally done by activists and philanthropists who have different priorities than corporate managers. Oversimplified, a key challenge in dealing with social activists is that they

want to act quickly and, once they start, are hard to stop, even if the ongoing evaluation shows that the campaign does not work toward its goals. Thus, aiming that energy at the right target in the beginning is much more important in PIC than in the more emotionally-detached PR field.

Secondly, the public tends to hold PIC campaigns to higher standards than corporations; thus, these campaigns also carry higher reputational risks. This is the flip side of having more legitimacy than PR campaigns. Honest mistakes are less of an issue in PR than in PIC especially given PIC's emphasis on research-based campaigns. Take for example Greenpeace's *Brent Spar* campaign in Europe: In 1991 Greenpeace organized a worldwide, high-profile media campaign against plans by the Shell oil company to dispose of the Brent Spar North Sea oil storage and tanker loading buoy in deep Atlantic waters. Initially, the Greenpeace campaign achieved a dramatic success (including a widespread boycott of Shell service stations in Germany), forcing Shell to back down. However, the campaign backfired dramatically in the long run and caused significant reputational damage to Greenpeace when fundamental questions were raised about whether its proposed solution was more harmful to the environment than Shell's original plan. It also was revealed that Greenpeace had grossly overestimated the oil and waste left on the Brent Spar station. In particular, Wallance & Johnston (1995) argued against Greenpeace's claims and noted that sinking the platform in the ocean depth as proposed might actually have been beneficial to the marine biology (Nisbet & Fowler, 1995). This caused serious damage to Greenpeace's reputation, something that frontloaded research could have easily avoided. Greenpeace itself acknowledged both its privileged position regarding legitimacy in contrast with other organizations and the additional reputational risks that Brent Spar-like mistakes pose to the organization: "A mistake in the details thus constituted a risk to legitimacy of the whole organization" (Redelfs, n.d., para. 9).

PR and PIC thus share much of the same research methodology and tools but differ in the timing and purpose of evaluation. While PR conducts initial research to identify key publics and to establish a benchmark to measure effectiveness of the campaign, the most important evaluation comes at the end when it justifies the campaign to management or clients. PIC is less concerned with justifying its efforts because the campaign will be judged by the behavioral change achieved. Despite the costs involved, the initial research and its evaluation are more critical to ensuring that the solution to the public interest issue proposed in the campaign works. Also, because the research used in PIC campaigns will likely face scrutiny from the opposition, extra diligence is required. Thus, research in PIC is done in the beginning, evaluated at the end, and is measured by behavioral change.

A target public in PIC can be as small as one specific individual. For example, Pagnattaro (2001) described an effort in 1932 to allow the banned publication of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Random House specifically targeted one U.S. federal judge in what can be seen as a proto-PIC campaign to challenge censorship in the United States. The campaign's research had shown that this judge held strong First Amendment leanings and a passion for literature. Random House created a special edition of *Ulysses* with European book reviews on the censorship and significance of the book. Then a carrier was sent from Europe to deliberately provoke an arrest for bringing a censored book through U.S. customs. This created a case with the book as evidence in that specific

judge's court. The federal judge reacted as predicted, declaring the ban of the book unconstitutional and dealing a major blow to censorship. A major victory for the freedom of the press in the United States was achieved by successfully targeting an audience of one (TEDxUF, 2015).

Trigger events

One of the most salient features of PIC is the presence of specific trigger events that have a significant impact on the issue and allow meaningful, positive behavioral change to occur in a limited time frame. Often, trigger events can lead to significant changes in mere months, weeks, or days around problems on which social actors have been trying to act for decades. These social change trigger events can either be planned or unplanned. They are to be understood broadly as media events that create awareness and attitude change sufficient to spark activism. Unplanned examples include the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức during the Vietnam era, which had a significant impact on the anti-war movement worldwide (Sanburn, 2011). Similarly, the self-immolation of Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi in 2010 sparked the Arab Spring (Sanburn, 2011). These events can create activism and the emergence of social movements. However, little sustainable social improvement is often achieved without a strategic plan focused on specific public interest goals. Even worse, trigger events may end up causing broader negative issues for societies. For instance, the Syrian Civil War is often seen as a direct consequence of the Arab Spring (Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014).

In contrast, significant societal improvements can be achieved if reactions to trigger events are governed by a strategic plan for a campaign. A famous example of this is Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a segregated bus December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama. Her subsequent arrest created national news and galvanized the local African-American community into a 381-day boycott of the local bus company, forcing desegregation of the buses and generating much of the activism of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.

However, I argue that Rosa Parks's refusal itself to give up her seat was not the actual trigger event in the PIC sense. Instead, the trigger event was a strategic communications campaign with a crystal-clear message created by Alabama State college professor Jo Ann Robinson, a lone activist. It was Robinson's campaign which turned the arrest into a boycott (Robinson & Garrow, 1987) and sparked the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Robinson, president of the Women's Political Council, had planned the boycott for two years and had even threatened the mayor of Montgomery with a boycott more than a year before Parks's arrest (Robinson & Garrow, 1987).

By December 1955, she was ready. On the night of the arrest, Robinson joined with two students to create and distribute between 35,000 and 53,000 fliers that read:

> Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down. It is the second time since the Claudette Colvin case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has

to be stopped. Negroes have rights too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother. This woman's case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday. You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus. You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off all buses Monday. (Robinson & Garrow, 1987, p. 45)

This one-day boycott was so successful that the leaders of African-American community came together that Monday night to elect as leader a relatively unknown young preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr. They unanimously decided to continue the boycott, despite the fact that many of them had previously been hostile to the boycott idea. Thus, Robinson's decision to start a boycott as a reaction to the arrest of Rosa Parks was the trigger event (Fessmann & Myslik, 2016, March). Without Robinson's action, it is unlikely that Rosa Parks's arrest would have had a significant impact because all the other African-American organizations in Montgomery did not want to act out of fear of the consequences (Robinson & Garrow, 1987). Rosa Parks's case would have played a role as a legal test case for segregation, but it probably would not have launched a social movement. The movement was launched by the decision that Robinson herself made that night without consulting anyone.

Summary

This paper has examined various dimensions in which PIC is different from PR (Table 1.1). In particular, the importance of research and trigger events for the development of campaigns sets the PIC field apart from PR. Understanding the links between research and trigger events will guide public interest communicators in creating more focused strategies and tactics, thus increasing campaign success rates.

This article is a step toward laying the foundations of PIC as a new communication discipline that is closely linked to, but distinct from, PR. PIC courses and curricula will differ from traditional PR courses not only in content. They also will target a different demographic of students, namely millennials who are interested in social activism but who are not comfortable with the corporate focus of PR. Thus, PIC ultimately hopes to train and empower a new generation of communication-savvy social change activists. This will alter the balance of power so, like vested organizational interests, activist publics have the resources to effectively participate in discourse and policy decisions related to the public interest. Adequate resources are especially important in such contentious areas as combatting climate change and encouraging tobacco cessation where

corporate interests have advocates than are significantly better trained and equipped than the activists working for the public good.

References

AT&T. (n.d.). It can wait overview. *AT&T*. Retrieved from
http://de.scribd.com/doc/236722643/It-Can-Wait-Overview

Barzilay, J., Johnson, L. & Mohney, G. (2016, June 16). Why the CDC hasn't launched a comprehensive gun study in 15 years. *abc News*. Retrieved from
http://abcnews.go.com/Health/cdc-launched-comprehensive-gun-study-15-years/story?id=39873289

Callison, C. (2004). The good, the bad, and the ugly: Perceptions of public relations practitioners. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 16*(4), 371-389. doi:10.1207/s1532754xjprr1604_3

Callison, C. (2001). Do PR practitioners have a PR problem?: The effect of associating a source with public relations and client-negative news on audience perception of credibility. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 13*(3), 219-234. doi:10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1303_2

Chaffee, S.H., & Berger, C.R. (1987). What communication scientists do. In C.R. Berger and S.H. Chaffee (Eds.) *Handbook of communication science* (pp. 99-122). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Chaffee, S. H., & Petrick, M. J. (1975). *Using the mass media: Communication problems in American society*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Cutlip, S.M., Center, M. & Broom, G.M. (1994). *Effective public relations (7th. Ed.)*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Digiday.com. (n.d.). AT&T's anti-texting campaign: Lots of impressions, zero success. Digiday. Retrieved from http://digiday.com/platforms/att-asks-twitter-whether-anti-texting-driving-campaign-working/

Dozier, D. M., & Lauzen, M. M. (2000). Liberating the intellectual domain from the practice: Public relations, activism, and the role of the scholar. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 12*(1), 3-22. doi:10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1201_2

Fessmann. J. (2016). The emerging field of public interest communications. In E. Oliveira, A. D. Melo & G. Goncalves (Eds.). *Strategic communication in non-profit organizations: Challenges and alternative approaches* (pp. 13-34). Wilmington: Vernon.

Fessmann, J. & Myslik, B. (2016, March). *The strategic inception of the Montgomery bus boycott*. Paper presented at the 11th Annual Conference of the Social Sciences, Florida Society of the Social Sciences, Gainesville, FL.

Friedman, M. (1970, September 13). The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits. *The New York Times Magazine,* 173-178.

Grunig, L A., Grunig, J.E. & Ehling, W. P. (1992). What is an effective organization? In J. E. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in public relations and communication management*. Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago: Aldine.

Harlow, R. F. (1976). Building a public relations definition. *Public Relations Review, 2*(4), 34-42. doi:10.1016/S0363-8111(76)80022-7

Holtzhausen, D. R. (2000). Postmodern values in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 12*(1), 93-114. doi:10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1201_6

J. E. Grunig (Ed.) with Dozier, D. M., Ehling, W. P., Grunig, L. A., Repper, F. C. & White, J. (1992). *Excellence in public relations and communication management*. Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates.

Johnston, J., & Taylor, J. (2008). Feminist consumerism and fat activists: A comparative study of grassroots activism and the dove real beauty campaign. *Signs, 33*(4), 941-966. doi:10.1086/528849

Kuhn, T. S. (2012). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Kant, I. (1785). *Grundlegung zur metaphysik der sitten*. Riga: J. F. Hartknoch.

Lafrance, A. (2015, January 12). America's top killing machine. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/01/americas-top-killing-machine/384440/

Ledingham, J. A. (2003). Explicating relationship management as a general theory of public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *15*(2), 181-198. doi:10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1502_4

Lilienfeld, S. O. (2007). Psychological treatments that cause harm. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 2*(1), 53-70. doi:10.1111/j.1745-6916.2007.00029.x

Lynch, M., Freelon, D., & Aday, S. (2014). Syria in the Arab spring: The integration of Syria's conflict with the Arab uprisings, 2011-2013. *Research & Politics, 1*(3), 1-7. doi:10.1177/2053168014549091

Mandela, N. (n.d.). Quotable Quote. Retrieved from http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/36606-it-always-seems-impossible-until-it-s-done

Mayhew, L. H. (1997). *The new public: Professional communication and the means of social influence*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University.

Nisbet, E., & Fowler, C. (1995). Is metal disposal toxic to deep oceans? *Nature*, *375*(6534), 715. doi:10.1038/375715a0

Pagnattaro, M. A. (2001). Carving a literary exception: The obscenity standard and "Ulysses." *Twentieth Century Literature, 47*(2), 217-240. doi: 10.2307/827850

Peters, J., & Tandoc, E. C. (2013). People who aren't really reporters at all, who have no professional qualifications: Defining a journalist and deciding who may claim the privileges. *NYU Journal of Legislation and Public Policy Quorum 2013*(34), 34-63.

Piedade, L. D., & Thomas, A. (2006). The case for corporate responsibility: Arguments from the literature. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management, 4*(2). doi:10.4102/sajhrm.v4i2.90

PRSA. (n.d.). About Public Relations [online]. Retrieved from https://apps.prsa.org/AboutPRSA/PublicRelationsDefined/

Reaves, J. (2001, February 15). Just say no to DARE. *Time Magazine.* Retrieved from http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,99564,00.html

Redelfs, M. (n.d.). Glaubwürdigkeit - Das wichtigste kapital einer NGO. *Greenpeace e. V.* Retrieved from http://www.greenpeace.de/themen/ueber-uns/glaubwuerdigkeit-das-wichtigste-kapital-einer-ngo

Robinson, J. A. G., & Garrow, D. J. (1987). *The Montgomery bus boycott and the women who*

started it: The memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee.

Sanburn, J. (2011, January 20). A brief history of self-immolation. *Time*. Retrieved from http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2043123,00.html

TEDxUF (2015, April 22). Ann Christiano: Accelerant on the fire of change. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Luj1StOyKA.

Top ad campaigns of the 21st century: Dove campaign for real beauty. (2015*). Advertising Age, 86(1)*, 16.

Wagner, C. B., & Sundar, S. S. (2008). The curiosity-arousing function of anti-drug ads. *The Open Communication Journal*, 2(1), 43-59. doi:10.2174/1874916X00802010043

Wason, P. C. (1960). On the failure to eliminate hypotheses in a conceptual task. *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 12*(3), 129–40. doi:10.1080/17470216008416717

Wallance, H. & Johnston, P. (1995). Brent Spar, broken spur. *Nature, 375*(6534). 708–709.

Wilcox, D. L., Cameron, G. T., Ault, P. H., & Agee, W. K. (2003). *Public relations: Strategies and tactics (7th ed.)*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.