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Best Practices for Global Public Relations

### Abstract

This essay will evaluate the reflective paradigm of public relation as the best practice for global application. After highlighting how the constructivist theory is harmful to ethical practice, I will draw comparisons from other listed theories and approaches to public relations and argue that certain theories are aspects of the reflective paradigm that will contribute to its international success. Components of the public sphere and civil society theories will be included to outline how issues arise and how communication occurs as a result, creating a more robust argument for the reflective paradigm.

The reflective paradigm of public relations is the only paradigm to adequately address and ethically solve conflicting socio-diverse issues that arise as a result of international application. The theoretical model outlines society's legitimating processes, stressing that organizational legitimacy in the eyes of publics is an integral goal of effective practice. Organizational reflection operates to transform conflicts into opportunities through two-way symmetrical communication that benefits society and the organization. Thus, reflection's role in public relations can be defined as "the core demand on organizational legitimacy" and public relations as "a specific reflective structure." (Holmstrom, 122). This approach aims to reach agreements through negotiation with active publics based on the socio-diversity of an area without silencing perspectives from any given group. Therefore, the reflective paradigm is the most effective, ethical way to practice global public relations as it is a product of larger societal cooperation and awareness in executive decision making.

Contrastingly, the constructivist approach defines public relations as "a strategy for using communication processes to generate desired effects by constructing desired realities." (Merten, 45). This approach relies on building 'fictional realities' that can distort 'actual realities' to buffer an organization from its environment. As such, public relations will control messages of the mass media to reflect positively on an organization, effectively cutting out the need for journalism as a transparent education function of society. Consequently, "the radius of relevant events reported by the media widens infinitely, but the possibility to rely on truth will vanish completely." (Merten, 45). In this approach, public relations "function as a means to persuade, influence, [and] convince the public" with respect to problems in a societal environment (Merten, 46). If public relations serves as a journalistic function by deciding what is news and constructing fictional realities benefiting the organization, society is misled and its concerns are

rendered illegitimate. Social justice is an essential pillar of ethical journalism, as well as modern public relations, however it is rendered obsolete by the constructivist approach.

The constructivist approach is a one-way asymmetrical model by nature. The practical application of this model allows for an organization to behave however it wants without regard to its implications on society. There is no channel for publics to provide feedback to organizations because they control the message and the medium. In addition, the constructivist approach is a mono-contextual perspective in which “differentiated perspectives see each other from the prejudiced position of their enclosed worldviews...[leading] to conflicts, hostility, and counter-action, exemplified...in a practice identified with concepts such as manipulation, propaganda and asymmetrical communication.” (Holmstrom, 122) Mono-contextual perspectives are met with opposition and challenged by protest movements: an inevitable eventuality if constructivist ideology were the standard for international public relations.

Similarly, protests and other forms of activism are often aspects of the reflective paradigm because reflection “is not a natural social ability of organizations” (Holmstrom, 123). Organizations, especially with the advent of social media, are often forced into reflection by activists who demand it. Although resource demanding, reflection is mutually beneficial to society and organizations because it builds and maintains relationships, is representative of stakeholder issues without integrating perspectives, and strengthens the notion that “planet and people are preconditions for profit” (Holmstrom, 123). We discussed an example of this in class when examining the global movement for green peace. Activists worldwide are protesting to hold corporations accountable for their environmental impact. This movement has caused many organizations to reflect on their behavior and reduce environmental impacts. Although drastic

structural change is not likely, corporate social responsibility initiatives have been launched by many organizations as a result.

Other theories, like the civil society and the public sphere, highlight the importance of how issues arise in public relations, but not how to solve them. While it is essential to theorize how publics come into existence to be proactive, it is just as important to create a framework for practical solutions. The civil society theory states that the raising of issues occurs on the local, national, and international level by civil organizations that form as a response. (Katus, 390). As a result of civil organizations shedding light on issues at any of the three levels, Katus asserts that “With issues in mind concerning whole collectives – or even the global community – it is not difficult to realize that our ideas...[have] changed, or are changing, because civil organizations are challenging us to reflect on these, offering at the same time information and knowledge, encouraging responsible solutions of the problems under discussion.” (Katus, 390). Thus, it can be argued that civil society is a sub-theory of the reflective paradigm. A key principle of the reflective paradigm is to negotiate solutions without sacrificing perspective, which can only be done if there are publics, or entities such as civil organizations, conducting self-reflection, and then engaging in two-way symmetrical communication with organizations to encourage organizational reflection. The demand for responsible solutions is an outcome of this process that provides organizations with the ability to identify future problems that may arise.

A similar argument can be made for the theory of the public sphere existing as a sub-theory of the reflective paradigm. The theory of the public sphere outlines how communication occurs on the individual level, within public meetings, and in the mass media and how public relations is interrelated at each level. Raupp argues that issues that are raised at the individual level take place under conditions of direct feedback, whereas direct feedback is only possible in

the arena of mass media in exceptional cases (312). Mass media suspends time and space, allowing for the same message to reach many different people who do not share similar views or experiences. This is defined as the “dispersed audience” (Holtz-Bacha, 1997), who are then fragmented into groups who have a common issue that unifies them. These fragmented segments of the audience become publics grouped around an issue or issues. Therefore, situation theory is useful to help them be identified by organizations to begin conducting communication. (Raupp, 313). Further, the theory of the public sphere is necessary to consider when organizations engage in two-way symmetrical communication to negotiate solutions. The idea of public “informedness” (Hallahan, 2001) is important to consider when practicing ethical communication because it separates latent or apathetic publics from active publics. Under the reflective paradigm, all publics are to be considered and respected because they are components of society as a whole, however strategic communication for problem solving is less beneficial with apathetic publics.

The reflective paradigm borrows and contains concepts from other theories that highlight how issues arise, how communication is conducted and the best way to find moral and responsible solutions that benefit society and the organization. It does not rule out or integrate perspectives of any group, but rather takes into consideration public issues and provides the most efficient framework to turn destructive problems into growing opportunities within an organization. This paradigm is the only model that incorporates all essential elements to practical, responsible and ethical public relations practice and is the best model for global application.

References

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