Introduction: Power – It’s personal and public

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Police notice to readers – proceed with caution – shifting subject matter ahead – power and public relations

A powerful reason for accepting the invitation to write about power and public relations is authorial awareness of the impact of power on our own lives. We note that at the level of felt, communicative experiences in personal and professional lives, symmetry does not much figure. Why should it be otherwise? Symmetry is a much-elevated feature of public relations academic thinking though we note no other academic discipline puts it in so egregious a position. We also note that it figures little in most other spheres of life.

But power invades all spheres. We imagine it as a modelling system, controlled by externalities and internalities, that has given shape to much of our lives. We experience its complexity for we recognise (and feel) the multiple meanings of power signalled in the literature: power over people and things, power to increase capacities in self, people and things; its multiple forms, from ‘hard’ to ‘soft’. Power heavily influences, if not determines, contours of our lives. It produces blocks and paths.

Birth issues you into social strata of class, gender, health, culture, education, jobs and people networks. The power modelling done to you and by you produces fewer or more blockages and paths forward. It produces the shape of life that character has to work with. To think about power and public relations first, ‘others’ and support left politics and trade union activity. I’m attracted to the aphorism that truth must speak to power and wryly note that it figures little in most other spheres of life. Do you feel it? We do and here is our tracing of its contours on and in ourselves, our reflexive relationship with it. We also reflect on the power relations of our co-authorship. We look at the literature and offer an overview of current thinking on power and public relations, which he calls fusion public relations.

Johanna Fawkes. I was born into a comfortable-looking middle class family in inner London, was highly educated and should hardly have noticed power issues in my ascendency through English society. But appearances deceive: both parents came from fractured, working-class homes, with fostering, abuse and abduction part of their story. They remade themselves as artists; one a musician and songwriter, the other a musician/cartoonist, the other a journalist/author. Home was creative and exciting but stir. Home was creating and exciting but stir. Cultural capital in one sphere was invalid in the playground (what eight-year-old would be impressed by family connections with Sydney Bechet or Jimmy Rushing?). Chronic ill-health was also an introduction to power and difference, with requirements to be exempted from classroom rules, sports and other ‘normal’ behaviours. Identifying with outsider and powerless groups came naturally and forcefully and I spent most of the 80s combining council campaign work with trade union leadership, particularly changing both institutions to enable new, self-organised voices, such as the Camden Black Workers Union, to be heard. It was a thrilling time to be a London activist, one of the last moments in the twentieth century where the powerless could engineer change through collective action. This was also where I learned how much power I possessed as an educated white woman with a good job (press officer) in a bureaucratic organisation (local government). An uncomfortable realisation, illustrating the complications of power, the dynamics of race, gender and class, and how much agency those defining themselves as victims may actually possess. This perception has become central. Power is still visible inside’, I could not erase those earlier experiences of the ‘other’. Power conflicts me. I empathise with groups of social and economic injustice.

Kevin Moloney: I was born into an Irish immigrant family that moved from the failed state of 1930s Ireland to imperial England in search of a life with more prospects. I was raised in the minority religion of Roman Catholicism, and at my priest-taught grammar school in a London working-class suburb I felt a social ‘otherness’ from the English-born majority. The discrimination was much but there was: tags of behaviour and language new to me. My university life started with that ‘other’ feeling but the elite status of the institution infused me into the me that my objective class position was being swapped from the ‘other’ into the ‘insider’. I was attracted to public relations as a career because it paid better than journalism, and in the 1960s was then a job found almost exclusively in London and in central government and powerful corporate bodies there. Mixing with directors and chief executives was confirmation of ‘having arrived’. In some 20 years doing public relations, I never heard the word ‘symmetry’ or proxies for it that I could recognise. What was wanted was communicative advantage in the interests of my employers. But if career choice put me on ‘the inside’, I could not erase these early experiences of the ‘other’. I spent most of the 80s combining council campaign work with trade union leadership, particularly changing both institutions to enable new, self-organised voices, such as the Camden Black Workers Union, to be heard. It was a thrilling time to be a London activist, one of the last moments in the twentieth century where the powerless could engineer change through collective action. This was also where I learned how much power I possessed as an educated white woman with a good job (press officer) in a bureaucratic organisation (local government). An uncomfortable realisation, illustrating the complications of power, the dynamics of race, gender and class, and how much agency those defining themselves as victims may actually possess. This perception has become central. Power is still visible inside’, I could not erase those earlier experiences of the ‘other’. Power conflicts me. I empathise with groups of social and economic injustice.
relations with significant others who were upstream, so to speak, of our labours – the editor and the anonymous reviewer. I tensed at this point, always a signal that I face those more powerful, because these colleagues were the gatekeepers to PRsm’s readership. But there is no point, of course, on that because you are reading these words now, which is evidence that our powerful colleagues let us through?

Our common commentary

Our power modelling (and our working relationship) has produced intellectual commonalities and differences. Here they are:

There has been a welcome explosion of scholarship on power and public relations in the past decade, producing new challenges to the Grunigian landscape. Power is one of these and it seems appropriate to make a brief, partial, overview of how it has been treated before suggesting our own views.

Instead of using chronology, it is interesting to try grouping the literature to see if there is common ground. We suggest approaches to power and public relations fall very broadly into two main camps:

• The managerial which seeks to address and redress power imbalances in the boardroom, workplace and to a certain extent, in communicative spaces. An example of this is Smudde and Courtright (2010) while their three dimensions of power (hierarchical, rhetorical, and social) are useful, the focus is on the organisation’s strategic deployment of power. Attempts to modify symmetry (Grunig, 2011) also fall into this category of organisational focus, as does the use of Habermas’s communicative action approach to even out power imbalances between public parties. Habermas’s theoretical location for this levelling was his public sphere concept, which Moloney (2000, p. 70) has described as “a rational, disinterested public opinion accessible to all citizens”. Historically and inadequately, Habermas was located in “the coffee houses, assembly rooms and Back Street” (p. 115), places noted for their exclusion of the working class and women of all classes. This inadequacy, nevertheless, does not prevent us from seeing the concept as an influential attempt to explain the development of liberal public opinion while also reminding us of the difficulties of the publicising of the public.

• The critical school focuses on how power manifests itself, shining light into hidden corners and revealing the tacit ideological assumptions in apparently neutral scholarship. There are many forms within this school, such as the political-economy approach which focuses on issues of class, race and gender to identify how power is concentrated in some groups and denied others (see Moloney 2000, 2006; Strifer & Miller, 2010). Like the managerial approach above, political-economy explores means of redressing imbalances around the tables of power; but it also looks at how players arrive at the table, noting that some have private jets, and others come on foot. This approach sees space for resistance–public relations challenging dominant-public relations and notes the rise of cause groups with powerful public relations narratives, as does the earlier managerial approach. For instance, environmental narratives, is also expressed through ideology to ensure that the unequal power distribution in society remains secure. Moloney views ideological messaging as the most powerful public relations, in terms of its effects on people’s common sense. Other critical scholars take a cultural-economic approach, which emphasised that ‘culture was the fluidity of power. The circuit of culture’ (DeSanto 2011) but diminishing in number, and seem to have little to say to the newer approaches.

Our literature review also says to us that the positivist, managerialist public relations texts of the past are still powerful (Moss & Bruning, 2007) drawing on Du Gay and Hall. It demonstrates how a circuit of moments (comprising representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation) offer a powerful model of inter-related, continuing, process-based communication with strong foundations in, and motivations of the determinants for, public relations. The power distribution in organisational communication (the ‘cultural economy’). Edwards (2011) has recently introduced Appadurai’s concept of scapes (ideoscope; technoscope; financescape; mediascape; ethnoscope) and has brought to our attention public relations narratives created by the imagination (imaginaries) as a mode of resistance. Related to this is the socio-cultural perspective, which examines how social structures contribute to the generation, acquisition and maintenance of power (see Ihlen, van Ruler & Fredriksson, 2009). Other examples include Edwards’ (2008) linkage between public relations and the sociology of Bourdieu, showing how his concepts of field, practice and habitus illustrate hidden strategies for gaining and resisting power: Postmodern approaches are endorsed by Holzhausen and Voto (2002) who have familiarised us with the public relations activist working ethically inside and outside the organisation as a force of resistance against the dominant coalition, a view shared by many feminist and post-colonial scholars. Holzhausen recently (2012) extended this debate by using a postmodern framework to interrogate the construction and deployment of meaning as instruments of power.

Looking at the approaches more summatively, we can see that the first, the managerial, tends to treat power as a micro-level to be ‘solved’ by managerial/organisational adjustments without significant reference to the wider environment, while the others take a macro-level, societal approach. There is also a contrast of notation: the managerial literature has a mechanical feel, as if power redistribution can be ‘fixed’, a weakness, we believe, also found in some political-economy writing. The other categories run the opposite risk of being so obscure, organic and fluid as to escape comprehension. (Note: since writing this, two key articles on public relations paradigm debates (Edwards, 2012, Curtin, 2012) offer deeper analysis of the role of power in defining the field than we have space for here.)

Writing this commentary showed us that our modelling by power and our understanding of the texts produce differing weights of sympathy for the approaches. Our judgement on the above approaches falls differently, sometimes overlapping and sometimes separating.

There are, however, separations, usually nuanced, between us: our commentaries below show where they are.

JF commentary

One of the themes to emerge from the socio-cultural approach (e.g. Edwards, 2011) is the recognition that the public relations academy’s discussion of power should not be seen only as a narrative about good versus bad, oppressors versus victims. The Postmodern approach also argues that there is good and bad, agency and resistance, and that public relations is involved in both (Holzhausen, 2012). Moving away from the corporation-centric, functionalist view of public relations to a social perspective creates space for activists and ‘Others’ (Edwards, 2012). The widening of this debate out of the boardroom and into the
streets is essential for any understanding of power and public relations. But I also sense a danger in setting up camps either side of a conceptual divide.

So, while I'm attracted by Kevin's musings on fusion public relations (see below), my sense is that recent writing has already taken the power frame as the key lens through which to examine public relations in society. These developments elevate power from an unacknowledged aspect of the field to its primary definition. Holzhausen (2012) and Coombs and Holladay's (2010) work on activism constitute an explicit move to shift the power focus of public relations away from the corporate function. The limit of their success can be seen in the new PRSA dilemma of public relations, which now believes that relations have been made. We are beginning to see the unliking of communication from corporations, which will allow greater scrutiny of not-for-profit, voluntary and charity bodies' communication practices than many of the critics offer (Miller & Dinan, 2008, for example). It would be a mistake, in my opinion, to underestimate the grassroots origins and ideological oppositions that full-time campaigner on social issues, I would have to accuse myself of gross self-selectivity, profligate doom-mongering and dubious judgement on many occasions (which made sense in a climate of catastrophe and confrontation, but which I wouldn't necessarily encourage in students).

Recently I have been trying to imagine how public relations might respond to the role of witness. After all, we are problem solvers par excellence, whatever side of the ideological divide we inhabit. The temptation when faced with the power abuses we see in the modern world is to stand in positions to use communication and other resources to effect change, to put things right. But what if things can't be put right? Is there a danger of getting sucked into the divisions and injustices of the material world, seeking rational solutions to irrational situations and in the process, in line with most Western social sciences, marginalising experience? How would it be to change the frame of the debate, to step back from the fracs and engage with a bigger picture? Some of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) participants have claimed this role, offering witness rather than protest. Their lack of denial has exaggerated older activists and caused division among the authorities, but the violence OWS experienced in New York suggests witness is a powerfully disturbing form of communication.

Some of the reflection on witness emerged from recent writing on ethics which focuses on the esoteric not exoteric, looking inward for guidance not outwards for rules. How to link that perspective with discussions of power? Like several of the writers cited above, I also see ethics as an integral to this debate. It is the means by which we frame the debates. Discussion of ethics and attempts to codify behaviour invariably concern the use and abuse of power, though it is rarely framed as such. Ethical issues regarding confidentiality, transparency, and honesty, for example, are issues of power – in which public relations usually has advantages over intended audiences (though management may use their power to withhold crucial information). Ethical codes are positioned to bolster professional claims in jurisdictional disputes (Abbott, 1988).

Professional bodies themselves are manifestations of the drive to acquire social capital through the possession of expertise – another expression of Foucault's (1980) 'knowledge-power'. Conversely, the explicit power to discipline members is rarely exercised (Parkinson, 2001). But ethics is also located in experience, in unease and discomfort, not merely the cool evaluation of consequence and duty. There is both an opportunity and a danger in linking power to ethics: if the old, narrow concept of ethics is extended to include the debates of angels versus devils. The discourses of power that demarcate some agents and victimise others can feel the doubt of opposites, leading to standoff rather than engagement. There is a further step to be taken too – a move beyond the material-power dimension. This is the hermeneutic tradition (summarised in Fawkes, 2012), which, at its best, offers conversation rather than speculation. Much of public relations literature is excited by postmodern 'turn' that opens up more space for our thinking. So let me book some of that space right now with a shot at theory formation.

Working with Jo on this article expanded my views on the values of postmodern thinking about public relations: it humanises our relations with one another and our relations with the world. The light can't be switched off.

I suspect that self-awareness will be the key to shifting the power attributes of public relations, and have suggested how a Jungian approach to consciousness, at a collective level, might stimulate such reflection and self-appraisal (Fawkes, 2010). A central tenet of Jungian philosophy/psychology is the recognition that the public face or Persona of an individual, organisation, or nation is only one aspect of the whole. Until the hidden, discovered Shadow aspects are at least partially accepted, the entity cannot function fully or ethically, because it concentrates on denial and blame, rather than self-awareness. This is not a New Age 'let's hold hands and make up' approach but a deeply challenging call to confront the inner darkness before trying to tackle the outer threats. Because it is applicable to groups, I argue it has relevance for the field of public relations. The past denial of power relations in public relations places the topic in the realms of Shadow. Now the light is being switched on.

So I celebrate the proliferation of new writing on power and public relations, but warn against generating a new orthodoxy. The theme for this century must surely be multiplicity, complexity, fluidity. Power is the medium through which these energies flow; it may be temporarily located in certain structures, but all around us structures are changing, collapsing, fading. The challenge for public relations is to observe this changing flow of power, to participate in the rebalancing between societal and corporate interests, and to make any contribution to the construction of a more equal, ethical future. There is scope for public relations doers and thinkers to help make bridges through communication – not the idealised models offered in the past, but something more fluid and harder to define, characterised by shifting power and allowing relationships, trust, and power to flow, and looking for common ground. It might be interesting to stop looking for the next fix, the instant solution, and offer longer-term, broader situational analysis, as some practitioners and advisors undoubtedly do. The rhetoric about serving society, so central to claims to be a profession, might be put to the test if practitioners were asked to consider genuinely the competing needs of employer and society.

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KM commentary

Working with Jo on this article expanded my views on the values of postmodern thinking about public relations: it humanises our subject through the introduction of an interpretative methodology. It makes the public relations academy a broader, dissenting church of practitioners rather than the usual orthodoxy. The idea of symbolic power is, I think, one of the chief assets of the postmodern ‘turn’ that opens up more space for our thinking. So let me book some of that space right now with a shot at theory formation.

A profitable theoretical device for this is the Bourdieusian idea of capitals (economic, social, political cultural, symbolic). Symbolic power is, I believe, especially insightful for us and the rest of this essay is an attempt to open up one meaning that could be within it. In its two words, it says to me that our work of symbol production fuses with power. It allows us to see how public relations narrations of events, discourses, and codes are positioned to bolster professional claims in jurisdictional struggles with other occupational groups (Abbott, 1988). The idea of symbolic power is, I think, one of the chief assets of the postmodern ‘turn’ that opens up more space for our thinking.
‘stakeholders’ and ‘groups’. These publics, these stakeholders, these groups, have shifting relations of power as they gain, lose or just survive through redistributions of scarce resources.

These redistributions take forms of co-operations and conflicts over control of economic and cultural assets; knowledge transfers; access to profitable markets and elite institutions; acceptions of moral worth; acceptance of ruling ideas, and awards of prestige and reputation. These redistributions are shifts of economic, political, social and cultural power. I argue that the terms ‘redistribution of resources’ and ‘shifts of power’ refer to the same phenomenon. That phenomenon has multiple expressions of its core essence. Think of the declining economic resources of Europe and the rise of Asian power. Think of the declining cultural power of finance capitalism as it faces the growing power of public opinion in favour of anti-capitalist movements (e.g. the global Occupy protests). These two examples have different ‘faces’ – economic and cultural – of the phenomenon power.

When redistributions of resources/shifting relations of power among social actors are communicated in ways public relations academics, professionals, journalists and members of the public recognise as public relations, we are seeing these changes of resources/powers/expressed as communicative relations. The persuasive power of our public relations words matches the redistributions of resources/shifting relations of power. When we see changes in political, economic, social, cultural power, we see changes in symbolic power via public relations. We are also seeing, I argue, that power and public relations approximate to each other in that one expresses itself in the other, i.e. the effects of one is found in the other. For example, an organisation with a major share of scarce resources has public relations with a major share of influence, positive or negative, on its publics and stakeholders. This is the fusion of power and public relations.

These shifting redistributions of scarce resources/power usually happen peaceably, either co-operatively or competitively, in dominant or subaltern modes (Moloney, 2007) with some power sources more consistently powerful than others (e.g. business and professional groups versus trade unions and low income groups) but all are subject to change over time.

I say, a la Foucault, that power and public relations saturate each other. I’m not saying that ‘power is public relations’ or vice versa. I avoid very purposefully the adjective ‘identical’. Instead, my theorising about power centres around the idea of a multiform essence of changing capacity which reproduces itself in multiple formats such as public relations. It is thinking about two entities that are separate but partially constitutive and co-existent of each other in their effects of achieving desired outcomes.

I have worked for strong and weak institutions, and doing their public relations told me that my messaging was more or less persuasive according to their market share, monopoly position, capital accumulation, cultural attraction, membership numbers, distinctive capacity, or media their product public relations and the deferral of suppliers and customers was palpable: designing joint campaigns with them invariably ended with my company’s view prevailing. Working with the UK media to promote the Open University in its early growth was a similar experience of favourable views and support. However, I found media indifference, and sometimes ridicule, when I relaunched ‘new’ products and services of unapparent, extra benefit to customers and users. In these cases, I felt I was holding ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ public relations hands accordingly. Today, think of the economic, political and cultural capital employed by the organisers of the London Olympics. These assets are also invested in, fused into, their public relations. This does not mean, however, that the receivers of their public relations will perceive and behave towards messages in the way intended. There is no determinism about outcomes: all forms of power/public relations fusion produce all forms of reaction, from domination to resistance.

Not all actors, therefore, in their fusion public relations can prevail but all seek to do so, either now or ever. Over time, we see losers as well as winners: scarce resources taken away as much as gained; power over resources increased and decreased; and public relations messages welcomed, trusted, ignored, hated, countered in a proportionate way. Let’s get personal here for we can think of an example close to home. When we public relations academics recruit from that public called student applicants, we are saying ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to their access to the scarce resource of a degree. When we, personally or institutionally, tell them whether they think of an example close to home. When we public relations academics recruit from that public called student applicants, we are saying ‘yes’ and ‘no’ to their access to the scarce resource of a degree. When we, personally or institutionally, tell them whether they can come to our campuses or not, we and they experience the power/public relations fusion. Public relations is not everything said, done, or done by, you and me, but rather it is the power/unseen, extra benefit to customers and users.

Finally back to the current home page of public relations theory. Its intellectual software is switching to a post-modern phase and is lively and rich in theorising, e.g. the arrival of the new journal Public Relations Inquiry and the easy, free global access offered by PRISM. At the start of my section, I said that I was going to do a little theory building within the spaces opened up by the symbolic power concept. In summary, I describe my space-filler, fusion public relations, as the conceptualisation of public relations effects of one expresses itself in the other, i.e. the effects of one is found in the other. For example, an organisation with a major share of scarce resources/power expresses as communicative relations. The persuasive power of our public relations words matches the redistributions of resources/shifting relations of power. When we see changes in political, economic, social, cultural power, we see changes in symbolic power via public relations. We are also seeing, I argue, that power and public relations approximate to each other in that one expresses itself in the other, i.e. the effects of one is found in the other. For example, an organisation with a major share of scarce resources has public relations with a major share of influence, positive or negative, on its publics and stakeholders. This is the fusion of power and public relations.

Polite notice to readers – you are now leaving the JF/KM pathway – watch for new construction sites ahead.

References


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[1] All my thinking about power and public relations in this essay refers to its effects on those outside the organisation, its publics and stakeholders. I acknowledge that there are power relations inside the organisation with other disciplines, which often puts public relations in the weaker position.

[2] I am not referring to power and public relations in this case but it could otherwise be power and advertising, marketing or other forms of promotional culture.

[3] My focus here again is on the external public relations relationships of organisations. Looking at the internal relationships of public relations with senior management and other disciplines, the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ public relations hand is the product of complicated and nuanced relationships. For example, public relations advice is often rejected or diluted, sometimes fortunately and sometimes regrettably by more powerful internal agents. But, none of that is visible to external audiences and whatever public relations messages are sent out, they are infused with the power quantum of the organisation.

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Back to: PRism 9(2) Contents Page

Back to: PRism home page