

Public Relations Through a New Lens — Critical Praxis via the “Excellence Theory”

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The “Excellence Theory” (J.E. Grunig et al., 2002) was initially developed, and is continually being tested, in order to demonstrate what makes for public relations practices that are both efficient and ethical for all parties involved. There is criticism which purports that such a normalizing theory is no longer relevant for current social, political, or corporate realities encountered by the public relations practitioner or researcher. This essay presents the “Excellence Theory” as a critical inquiry paradigm, allowing for the creation of spaces accessible by otherwise marginalized publics by the public relations practitioner.

“Becoming an excellent communicator means more than just learning how to get results. It means growing as a person, appreciating the values that underlie good communication, developing the skills and character traits that naturally emerge from serious engagement in the practice of communication, and thereby contributing to the cultivation of those communication-based values, skills, and traits in society.” (Craig, 2006, p. 44)

Robert T. Craig, when discussing communication as a “practice” (2006), recognized that communication theories must be normative as well as constructive. They must both be generalized to the populations they are intended to help understand and better the world (the ideal), as well as attain specific results within a communication phenomenon (the real). In this recognition, Craig declared that being an excellent communicator is more than just following the rules. “Excellence,” as stated in the opening quotation to this essay, comes from practice and growth — and from praxis. If the term “communicator” were to be replaced with “public relations practitioner” in the above quotation, public relations practitioners and researchers would be presented with a description of J.E. Grunig and L.A. Grunig’s “Excellence Theory.”

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Public relations, as defined by J.E. Grunig (1992), is "the management of communication between the organization and the publics that it interacts with" (p. 3). Through the continued work of the Excellence Project, the "Excellence Theory" demonstrates how excellent public relations is able to interact and work with both internal and external publics, recognizing that publics are not merely passive audiences accepting messages in a hegemonic structure,¹ but that each public that comes into contact with the message is viable and enfranchised with agency.

The "publics" in public relations exist within and outside the organization. Each public, through the interaction with the public relations professional, allows for a variety of perspectives and insights toward a single goal or a collection of goals. If these groups are not allowed the choice to have their respective voices heard and recognized as active and important, decisions are made by the dominant coalition (L.A. Grunig et al., 2002) without all of the mitigating factors and facts placed in front of them, resulting in the once dominant organization losing economic, political, and social capital within and among the publics served. It is this critical perspective to public relations, respecting publics as ethical and moral beings, that L.A. Grunig et al. (2002) aligned with when they considered the most important question for ethical public relations: "How can one balance the interests of society, of the public relations profession, and of the individual professional" (p. 556).

Why This? Why Now?

Praxis² – making decisions via a theoretically and research-informed paradigm – has been called for by public relations researchers and practitioners since the discipline began forming. *The Journal of Public Relations Research (JPRR)*, during the past decade, has put forward two special issues discussing the "future" of public relations, both in research and in practice, by the major researchers and practitioners in the field. C.H. Spicer (2000), in *JPRR*, explained that there are new directions in which public relations research and practice need to go. In his introduction, Spicer indicated, "the authors of the articles . . . are concerned with enhancing the viability of the kinds of heterogeneous problem-solving conversations necessary for successful democracy" (p. 129). For Spicer, "public relations should serve as the referee for the often contentious problem-solving conversations necessary for a democratic society to thrive. Public relations should facilitate . . . making profoundly uncomfortable conversations possible" (p. 129).

In the same vein, Gower (2006), in her discussion of the past and future of public relations research, recognized public relations research was sitting "at a crossroads" (p. 177). She pointed out that, just as management research has begun incorporating aspects of critical and postmodern theory into its own literature and practices, so too does public relations need to bring such conversations within its own camp. In citing Elizabeth Toth's 2005 article on the topic, Gower argued that public relations

¹ Hegemony, as theorized by Gramsci (1971), is the dominance of one group over another, with or without the use of force, to the extent where power becomes normalizing over the dominant group.

² See Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) for further and detailed discussions on this concept of praxis. Admittedly, the idea of praxis is not often discussed within non-academic audiences. However, even for the practitioner, theory can create a lens through which to see the work being done.

practitioners and researchers need to not only locate those practices that bring the highest return on investment for the management and organization, "but we also need to critically examine what it is that public relations practitioners do and the consequences of that practice for society" (Gower, 2006, p. 180). Both Spicer's (2000) and Gower's (2006) positions call for using critical theory as a way to better understand, research, reconstruct, and practice public relations for professionals and researchers alike. Unfortunately, as both authors have stated, although critical and postmodern approaches to public relations do an excellent job of identifying and articulating the socio-cultural concerns within and surrounding the public relations profession, these same critiques fall short of providing solutions toward these concerns for those same practitioners. In response to the above-stated positions, the central argument of this paper – and one that has not been taken on in the published literature thus far – is that public relations practitioners should use critically theoretical approaches to *construct and engage current*, not simply *critique previous*, public relations practices. Such a move can be accomplished by viewing the "Excellence Theory" as both a normative and constructive public relations theory.

This essay will demonstrate that normative and critical approaches are not contradictory and that the "Excellence Theory" can be interpreted as both, repositioning the theory as an emancipatory praxis. In particular, by looking at the specific cases identified by the "Excellence Theory" as lines of future research (L.A. Grunig et al., 2002), the theory can be used to not only present what makes *great* public relations, but also to identify the critical realities and ruptures within public relations practice. Such deconstructions³ (Derrida, 1974) and interrogations via the "Excellence Theory" position the theory's application in this essay as a method of ideological critique of public relations scenarios, whether in the formation of, or the reflection on, public relations practices and practitioners. This argument will be accomplished by 1) looking at the positioning of critical theory within the public relations discipline; 2) examining the call for critical critique within public relations research, theorizing; and practice, and 3) re-positioning the "Excellence Theory" as a praxis-centered system focused on the analysis and repair of public relations professionals and organizations alike.

The Position of Critical Theory in Public Relations Research and Practice

Seeing public relations as a critical and emancipatory set of practices and theories, rather than public relations looking for more persuasive, economic, and efficient ways to complete goals for the dominant coalition, may seem paradoxical. Nonetheless, if the goal of the public relations practitioner is to serve the public(s) that he or she represents, and if there are multiple publics within a given communication scenario that the practitioner must ethically serve, then it is the logical and ethical responsibility of the public relations researcher and theorist to interrogate the discipline and practice of

³ "Deconstruction," the literary theory devised by Jacques Derrida, is the process whereby the presented communication (the "text" itself) is analyzed not for what comes through on the surface but, instead, is not said – the ruptures within the text. For the public relations practitioner, the messages that are created by and for a public (an organization, an advocacy group, an individual) are interrogated for what is *not* addressed. These might include women, minority groups (any groups that are disenfranchised – *whose powers or voices are taken away or not recognized*), or other publics.

public relations through all epistemological systems. Critical theory becomes a logical methodology for such work.

Critical theory, positioned as an extension of Marxist ideology and critique, "maintains a non-dogmatic perspective which is sustained by an interest in emancipation from all forms of oppression, as well as by a commitment to freedom, happiness, and a rational ordering of society" (Bronner & Kellner, 1989, p. 2). The driving focus of critical theory and those that practice it is to understand and change the same social institutions (whether they are grounded in business and commerce, government, entertainment, or education, etc.) that oppress one group of people or class in favor of another. The correlation between the ethical goals of public relations and critical theory are evident. Critical theory is at the same time both normative (constructing an ideology that promotes the above commitment as an agenda) and discursively subjective (recognizes the particulars and situation-specific moments that construct reality). The same can be said for the emancipatory potential of public relations, represented by the "Excellence Theory."

The "Excellence Theory," originally proposed in 1992 (J.E. Grunig et al., 1992), was grounded upon an "extensive literature" review and evaluation, examining theoretical positions from various academic disciplines and ontologies, including: marketing, psychology, communication, and feminist studies (J.E. Grunig, 1991). The project's purpose was to develop a new approach to public relations, detailing to public relations practitioners what organizations must have (both in expectations and characteristics) in order to be excellent and how to communicate those same concepts. The resultant characteristics of excellent public relations programs look at all levels of organization: program, departmental, organizational, and societal, along with the desired effects of excellent public relations practice. These characteristics not only present the "Excellence Theory" as a normative ideology, but also as an emancipatory system that strives for egalitarian opportunities for all publics. The characteristics and effects of excellent public relations, as presented by L.A. Grunig et al. (2002, p. 9), offer an opportunity for the critical inquiry of the dominant coalition within either an antonymous public relations organization or an organization with a public relations component. This new possibility for the theory and its pragmatic capabilities position the "Excellence Theory" as a critical paradigm applicable to the current calls for critical research within public relations.

Mickey (1998), in his examination of public relations research at the time, found that critical theory work was nearly non-existent. Because the goal of public relations was to continually develop a better campaign for the client, a normative-quantitative and social-scientific approach to public relations research had been the norm. Mickey asserted that the position of public relations allowed an opportunity to understand and critique the very media that it used in its practices. In both his 1997 work (analyzing Harms and Kellner's public relations campaign for Kuwait via the work of Jean Baudrillard, seeing public relations materials and constructed media as representations of a simulacra) and his 1998 work (looking at Internet marketing through the lens of cultural studies), Mickey presented the researcher with epistemological ruptures located within the dominant public relations research. These spaces in the dominant discourse become opportunities through which to understand other epistemologies and their value to public relations research and practice.

Public relations practice and research have moved from a static system to one that is “fluid and complex” (Gower, 2006, p. 185). This fluidity, though it does not preclude the use of normalized or empirical “how-to” theories, does illuminate the limitations of such perspectives. However, counter to Gower’s position, as well as others, public relations theories need not be done away with nor superseded by new or revolutionary perspectives. Instead, the existing theories should be allowed to evolve, to be extended from the empirical status quo and, using what has already been learned through those theories, helped to recognize the simultaneous actions of multiple publics encircling a particular scenario. These multiple publics should not be “forced” into a particular mold to be considered “measurable” or symmetrical. By recognizing the complexity of contemporary public relations phenomena, and accepting the uniqueness of each of the publics involved, a critical system of inquiry can be used to recognize the interrelationships among all active and passive publics, not just those dominant groups that have the most social or economic capital to expend toward their own ends.

L.A. Grunig et al. (2000) compared the desires of public relations to act ethically and morally with the values and ethics found within feminist theoretical positions, both in relation to research as well as practice. The authors presented the argument that public relations, as both a practice and a discipline, has adopted much of what would be considered a feminist set of values when attempting to enact or achieve excellent public relations within and outside organizations. And, as more university and professional training courses and research point out the need for values, ethics, and relationship construction and maintenance, a feminist perspective becomes a viable perspective within the discipline. There is a counterargument to this position among public relations practitioners. L.A. Grunig et al. (2000) point out that, even though most PR practitioners are women, the numbers that are in senior managerial positions within organizations are relatively small. This results in a more product-centered, less process-centered approach to public relations practice, a reality that moves counter to a feminist perspective, although the latter seems to match that which makes excellent public relations. Critical approaches to research and practice, by engaging and interrogating this paradox, move public relations to a more critical and, thereby, more emancipatory state.

As is presented through these examples, critical theory not only needs a place at the public relations research “table”; it should have been invited a long time ago. The next step is to demonstrate how the “Excellence Theory” can answer this call for critical research and critique within public relations theory and practice, allowing for a position of critical public relations praxis to be constructed.

Praxis-centered Critical Action Through the “Excellence Theory”

The “Excellence Theory” is in a position from which public relations can be practiced ethically as well as offers a launching point for collaboration within larger social democratic structures (J.E. Grunig, 2000). Gower (2006) declared that, as public relations moves into the realm of management and decision-making positions, new directions of research must be engaged. “Globalization, with its emphasis on integration, power, multinational corporations, and democracy, demands attention from our critical/cultural theorists” (p. 186). Flynn (2006) recognized public relations professionals “as both practitioners and scholars . . . central to the success of both the organizations we represent or study and the communities that we serve” (p. 192).

If “excellence” is to be achieved within public relations praxis, the roles of the public relations practitioner must be simultaneously normalized, as well as critically flexible, to the specific public differences that can and do exist vis-à-vis a theoretically-informed analysis and praxis. By employing the “Excellence Theory,” this call can be answered. Dozier and Lauzen (2000) echoed this sentiment by stating that applying the theory to diverse groups is “altogether appropriate” (p. 9). The following section will detail how this is possible.

Ideally, if public relations practitioners recognized that publics have agency, have power, and have voice, the need to locate systems of oppression within messages or organizations could be done away with. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Starting with Marx, and moving through the theoretical work of Derrida, Althusser, Said, and Foucault,⁴ messages are identified as “powerful” and can create oppressive structures and systems simply by one language being used over another. These structures are formed by the discursive and media-centric choices made by the organization (often through the public relations practitioner) and can be identified through critical analysis. Although the theoretical interrogations presented by these theorists are often criticized for effectively leading to an end point of existence (where, by way of deconstruction, nothing can exist), the work completed by these theorists and others under the “critical” or “postmodern” umbrella can be practically applied to public relations, allowing for the formation of a *praxis-centered* public relations practice and practitioner.

Woodward (2003) called for a *practical-critical* approach to public relations. Aligned with what Gower (2006) and Spicer (2000) argued, this “perspective supports progressive possibilities inherent to a social, economic, political, and cultural environment in which public relations activities play an increasingly central role in public discourse” (p. 412). Such a theory-centered approach allows the public relations practitioner to engage in public relations through praxis for the benefit of all publics the practitioner works with and for (including the organization she or he represents).

Looking to L.A. Grunig et al.’s (2002) final chapter outlining future research lines based on the Excellence Theory and the related work, a critical lens can be developed that allows for specific ruptures – the problems that can hinder a truly egalitarian and consensus-forming public relations phenomenon – to be identified, interrogated, and resolved. The generic principles, theoretically, can be viewed as a collective approach to public relations. If public relations practitioners are meant to serve all voices, then the collective voices are stronger than the individual competitive voices. J.E. Grunig (2000) invoked Hofstede’s dimensions of culture (“individualism or collectivism,” “power distance,” “uncertainty avoidance,” and “masculine or feminine”) as a way to demonstrate how the “Excellence Theory” not only normalizes public relations practices to ensure excellence but also considers social, political, and economic idiosyncrasies as viable aspects to each public as they are interacted with. Demonstrating the capabilities of the “Excellence Theory” as a critical analytic model,⁵ each of the six contextual conditions identified

⁴ Each of these theorists (as well as others) and their respective works (Marx, 1978; Derrida, 1976; Althusser, 1971; Said, 1979; Foucault, 1972) create not only the different paradigms through which to understand the text (for public relations, the practices and subsequent results and implications of those practices) but also the specialized vocabulary to enact such an interrogation.

⁵ A model based on the “Excellence Theory” and infused with the primary tenets of critical theory.

within the generic principles of excellence (L.A. Grunig, J.E. Grunig & Dozier, 2002) will be illuminated. Each of these conditions is not presented as a normalizing and thereby marginalizing system, but as a critical paradigm that allows for ruptures within the dominant discourse⁶ to be located by the public relations practitioner and subsequently resolved. The resultant critical paradigm will allow the practitioner to move from practical technician to theoretically informed (praxis) public relations manager.

Culture, Including Language

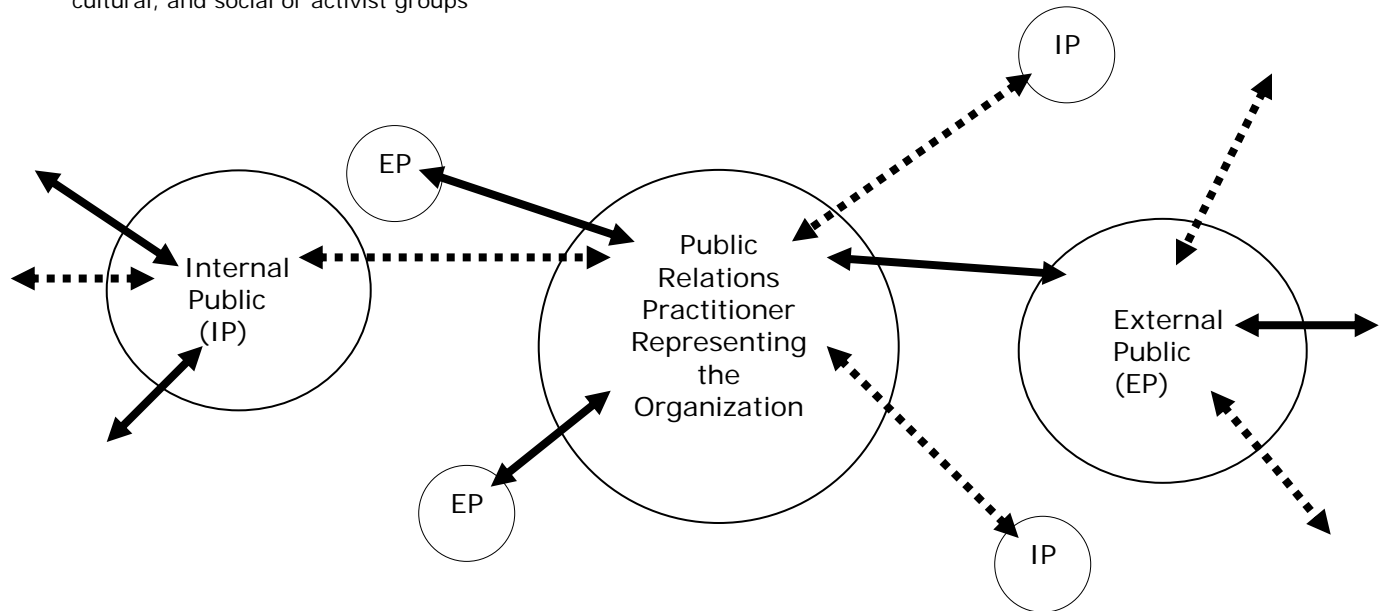
Culture and language are a primary position from which to interrogate a public relations campaign or organization for positions that may marginalize or harms publics. The position of culture and language is one that allows insights for the public relations practitioner and researcher alike, as culture and language can present distinct barriers to understanding for all publics represented within the public relations sphere. Often, through the methods of cultural re-/production and representation (mediated campaigns and messages), cultural positioning or control has been the terrain from which one public wields power over another.

Contrary to positions that claim the "Excellence Theory" (as a normalizing system) falls short of recognizing discourses outside of the dominant coalition, L.A. Grunig et al.'s (2002) work helps to ensure that all positions are not only given voice, but are part of the public relations praxis. It allows points of entry for the understanding of the publics' cultures and discursive positions. Two-way symmetrical communication need not only consider the dominant coalition and one other position of power; rather, the public relations practitioner, as the representative of the dominant coalition, will engage multiple and varied activist or general positions counter or askew to the dominant coalition's platform, helping to ensure that all voices are heard by the decision-making members of the organization. Figure 1 presents visually the relationships and how they work through the public relations practitioner in order to ensure that all publics are represented equally in order to ensure empowerment amongst and between each active participant.

The public relations practitioner, if she or he is committed to the position of praxis grounded in the "Excellence Theory," must ethically exchange with multiple cultural and linguistic agents, acting as not only a translator for publics but also as advocate for each active public during all exchanges. If *all* cultural concerns and considerations are not engaged and presented, ethical consensus and resolution are not possible.

⁶ For the critical theorist/cultural studies practitioner, the "dominant discourses" are the messages that are exchanged between the power-holders (in Marxist terminology, the Bourgeoisie) and the disenfranchised publics, often activist groups, internal workers, or marginalized populations (the Proletariat). The messages help the researcher understand what is and what is not being discussed by all parties involved in the message process.

Figure 1. The position of the public relations practitioner working with and for multiple organizational, cultural, and social or activist groups



Dashed lines = internal public relations interactions; solid lines = external public relations interactions; non-anchored lines represent those other publics that can also have contextual influence on the decision-making process

The Political System

The politics that govern the decision-making processes of a particular public are just that – particular. No two publics function in exactly the same way at the same time. Therefore, a generic approach to such a polysemic terrain will only hold back the practitioner from ethically engaging the publics (whether activist, organized, or otherwise). In addition, by attempting to normalize what it means to be a great public relations practitioner, the politics of non-dominant groups become ignored because non-dominant groups are not in a position to be engaged, they are not encountered all that often (at least, not often enough to fall within one or two standard deviations of the “typical” group or organization).

In reality, the “Excellence Theory,” by discovering what makes excellent public relations practice with regard to politics, demonstrates the shortcomings created or not recognized by the dominant coalition when working with and for an activist or otherwise non-represented public. Through this critique, political and cultural differences are recognized not as roadblocks but educational opportunities for all groups involved in the two-way symmetrical communication process. For two-way symmetrical communication to work on behalf of all groups, all discourses must be engaged ethically, equally, and without prejudice. This governing principle, as engaged through the “Excellence Theory,” allows for

those voices that may be positioned at the margins, or "othered" in some way, the opportunity to speak if the group so chooses. The "Excellence Theory" does not *give* voice to the voiceless because, in the truest sense of critical theory and the two-way symmetrical perspective, this power is not for the dominant coalition to give (such an ideology assumes a position of power or dominance of one group over another). The "Excellence Theory" *does* create a space for voice.

The Economic System and the Level of Economic Development

These two constructs (economic system and development), from a Marxist perspective, should be considered natural extensions (one coming from and leading to the other). As has been highlighted previously, the corpus of public relations research has taken into consideration those publics and coalitions that have been able to engage each other in discourse as a way to come to mutual understanding and collaboration. Unfortunately, those publics that are recognized through the research are part of the research precisely because they have been recognized. Although they may not consider themselves part of an oppressive (bourgeoisie) system, these cooperating non-dominant publics are still advantaged by the ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1971) within which they operate by being allowed voice within the dominant ideology. This act denies agency to those publics that are unable to be heard (the proletariat) because of their status within the hegemonic discursive formation, a position Dozier and Lauzen (2000) identified as the "empirical-administrative" scholarship position (p. 16). Working from this position perpetuates the superstructures and ideological apparatuses that are being analyzed and critiqued, sometimes considered the "trap" of ideological critique.

The economic factors that must be considered when critiquing public relations practices are both monetary and political. The "Excellence Theory," by moving toward collaboration, does this through recognizing where imbalances occur. These imbalances must include those publics that are not heard in the discourse. Without their positions, the subjective reality from where ethical and holistic decisions can be made is incomplete, thereby limiting the actions that can be done. If Figure 1 is to be engaged ethically and collaboratively, *all* internal and external publics must be allowed the choice to be heard at all steps of collaboration. Whether or not the engaged publics are equal in their political capital (through influence on multiple levels) or monetary position (to create media messages used to influence various publics to their advantage), their arguments and narratives (Fisher, 1984) must be recognized as valid. Denying this will move the practitioner away from true ethical public relations.

The Media System

Public relations practitioners recognize the value of the media systems within a specific population (e.g., organization, city, region, country). Within the purview of critical analysis of public relations, the "Excellence Theory" can point out where specific opportunities exist for co-resolution and how mediated messages can assist the various publics. By looking at the "Excellence" principles (as a way of determining what needs to be considered in order to help ensure ethical and efficient operation), appropriate message types can be identified and co-constructed with representatives of all involved parties giving input and guidance, as is required within a two-way symmetrical communication model. In

this way, public relations practitioners can “become ethics counselors to management and internal advocates of social responsibility” (L.A. Grunig et al., 2002, p. 540).

Mickey (1998) pointed out “if public relations depends on the media to get its message out, we must open up to question the practices of that process. *That* is the role of critical theory applied to public relations” (p. 340, emphasis added). The “Excellence Theory” aligns with this statement and allows for such an opening within the theory for media systems inquiry and interrogation. By recognizing that media systems must be engaged ethically and be socio-culturally situated, practitioners can use the theory as it was intended, as a suggestive (non-exhaustive) menu for ensuring that all publics (both internal and external) have the choice for voice and, in this case, that the relevant media outlets and systems are used ethically and in the best interests of all publics involved.

The Extent and Nature of Activism

The position of activism and of “the activist” is the most paradoxical for a standard normalizing system. How does the practitioner work with a public that, by its very nature, does not work within what is considered “normal behavior” for a public within public relations practice? The answer is recognizing the paradox as just that, a paradox, but also as an opportunity to ethically and morally serve all publics involved. The paradox cannot be reconciled at the organizational level by the social-scientific public relations practitioner. Instead, activists must be recognized as the “invisible clients who shape the agenda in public relations research” (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, p. 3). The “Excellence Theory,” through recognizing these positions and incorporating them within the multiple symmetries expressed in Figure 1, demonstrates its use as a critical inquiry system, offering “a useful heuristic for rethinking activism and an exemplar of how that might work” (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000, p. 3).

The research agenda for public relations has, traditionally, focused on dominant coalitions that are well-funded, often not considering the position of publics that are marginalized out of the normalizing model. The use of the “Excellence Theory” to recognize the differences and imbalanced power distributions among the “publics” that the public relations practitioner works with and for is key, not only for showing the emancipatory possibilities of the “Excellence Theory” for publics, but also (in a very practical sense) for creating spaces of freedom and choice for those same publics by recognizing their position as one with ethical and moral legitimacy.

What Are the Next Steps for Public Relations Research and Practice?

With the repositioning of the “Excellence Theory” as not only a normative, empirical system but also as a critical epistemic, the next step is to begin the process of demonstrating its effectiveness as such a system of knowing. Each of the aspects above, taken from the theoretical extensions offered by the “Excellence” team (L.A. Grunig et al., 2002), has been deconstructed and presented in a new light, one that allows for the examination and interrogation of public relations campaigns and messages, ensuring that hegemonic structures are not allowed to dominate within the public relations scenario. Rather, these structures are recognized and countered appropriately.

Although critical theory has been used in public relations research (as has been highlighted above), there is more work to be accomplished. With the powerful reality of the convergence of media, when trying to understand the control and power of mediated messages within and outside (yet ever influencing) organizations, the consolidated production of those messages – and the systems of discipline and control from which they come – are more important than ever. What McChesney (1999) has recognized as the future end of contemporary American media, moving the industry toward an oligopoly, is intricately tied to public relations practice. It is the role of the public relations theorist and researcher to identify and position the convergence of global media, creating a knowledge base for the public relations practitioner to reference and use.

The “Excellence Theory” allows for such analyses. Not only is the theory normative – demonstrating what effective public relations can and should “look like” (the macro level), it allows for the adjustments and inclusions that are necessary for an increasingly articulated global culture (the micro-level). It is up to future public relations theorists, researchers, and practitioners to employ the theory in order to create emancipatory spaces for otherwise silenced voices within both the *practice* and *practices* of public relations while still ethically serving the organization to their best abilities.

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