

ESSAYS ON 21ST-CENTURY PR ISSUES



**A NEW
MORAL
AGENDA
FOR
PR**



PAUL SEAMAN

A new moral agenda for PR

Paul Seaman

“Provocative, theoretically astute, a must read”

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“Good read for PR professionals”

Karthik Srinivasan

Head of Digital Strategy, Edelman India

In the late 20th century PR had to manage an increasing number of controversial issues. It became part of the corporate story: the spotlight was turned on its own activities. Firms were invited – rather forcefully – to address their reputations the way they once addressed profits.

This essay interrogates the response of leading academics, especially Jim Grunig, as they aimed to build an idea of PR fit for the post-modern, reflexive, inter-active, wisdom-of-crowds, stakeholder society environment they studied.

photo: "WTO protests 10" by Steve Kaiser
<http://goo.gl/mu09Y>



As the post Second World War euphoria fizzled out into new-age angst, the late 60s and 70s saw optimism turned into scepticism about progress. During that period protest movements arose that questioned the “military-industrial” complex of white-coated experts motivated by profit. Capitalism, it was claimed, was destroying the planet. People became increasingly sceptical about the value and consequences of economic growth. Books such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, and groups such as Greenpeace fuelled a green backlash that we are still experiencing.

Events such as the core meltdowns of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl spooked the world. They became indelible symbols of man’s folly and served as proof points among anti-corporate anti-technology campaigners. Thirty years or so later, the nuclear industry has barely recovered. Moreover within the nascent environmental movement emerged the new radical politics of the 1990s. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 anti-capitalism sentiment took on different

dimensions. Communism, socialism and the peace movement rapidly lost credibility. New forces emerged, consisting of politicised greens aligned with anti-globalisation protesters.

There was a feeling – one shared by protesters and serious thinkers – that major corporations had participated in undermining the sense of community which held society together. The growth of the shopping mall on the city outskirts, for instance, was seemingly responsible for turning town centers into decrepit zones inhabited by criminals. The likes of the US’s WalMart and the UK’s Tesco became liberal *bête noires*. It was said that the corporate and major institutions in society were suffering from a core values crisis and, as a result, a trust deficit (although WalMart redefined the debate¹ in the internet age by exposing Potemkin communities²).

1 http://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/capital-markets_526881.html

2 <http://www.answers.com/topic/potemkin-village>

In the 1990s, from global warming to globalisation, the PR trade's clients – particularly large multi-national companies – found themselves on the receiving end of a hostile crowd's anger. The movement's aims were popularised in books such as Naomi Klein's *NoLogo*, a title that struck a blow at brand value, consumerism and globalisation.

The anti-globalisation protest peaked at the Battle of Seattle in 1999. In scenes reminiscent of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam protests of the 1960s, Seattle's air was filled with tear gas, pepper spray and rubber bullets as militant demonstrators clashed with police. As delegates arrived at the conference their way was blocked by groups of demonstrators chained together at street crossings. One group even managed to disrupt the opening ceremony. Elsewhere mobs roamed the city smashing windows, singling out Starbucks's for special attention. A civil emergency was declared. The National Guard took control and enforced a curfew. More than 600 people were arrested from the 40 000 or so protesters.

This was one of many such outbreaks of violence across the world. Similar riots took place outside major international conferences of bodies such as the World Economic Forum, the G8, EU and even the UN conferences on global warming. It was as if no international conference was safe from the mob.

There was a sense that corporations and governments were losing their grip on public opinion because their ethics and morals were not the same as the audience's. This feeling became more extreme as the world's

economies boomed in the late 20th and for some of the first decade of the 21st century.

The anti-globalisation lobby became more subdued after 9/11 and more still after the global credit crunch turned into a global recession. Yet the interconnected economy, as the WEF savants of Davos now euphemistically dub globalisation, is now more rampant, arguably more in demand, than ever in the developing world.

Nevertheless, green, anti-corporate and anti-growth sentiments remain strong, particularly in the developed West.

In fact, while all these trends characterise something tangible, it would be wrong to accept such a one-sided picture of Western enthusiasm for anti-consumerism. The very fact that global economies boomed mostly from the 1980s onward shows another side to society's drive that's diametrically opposed to the campaigners' viewpoint. The masses of the world embraced globalisation. They adopted new technologies such as mobile phones, IT, internet, CDs, DVDs, GMOs and bought more cheapened old ones such as air travel and cars etc..

It is debatable whether the protesters ever deserved the attention they received. It is also questionable whether they ever really represented the views and instincts of the avaricious consuming masses who expressed their will through their purchasing power. But of the influence of the protesters on academia, the media and on political debate there can be little doubt. This middle class green backlash had clout.



photo: "Mambo": dance steps inlaid into the sidewalk of Broadway, Capitol Hill, Seattle, Washington by Joe Mabel

Dead-end search for models

Recognising the challenge in the 1980s and early 1990s were two PR academics, Jim Grunig, Professor Emeritus for the Department of Communication at University of Maryland, and Todd Hunt, Professor Emeritus at Rutgers University School of Communication. They came together with their peers in an attempt to find the key to reconnect corporate America with its public, and on a more ambitious scale the American nation with world opinion. At the same time they sought to address the low esteem PR was held in. They believed PR required a model that would define it as a proper profession and explain its role and behaviour to both the public and clients.

In their view, the absence of a progressive model was holding PR back; a model being a simplified representation of reality.

They reasoned that one was required to transform PR into an acknowledged ethical, credible, trustworthy profession. They thought this was required to help head off activist protests and to put public relations professionals (let's just call them 'PRs') at the head of the corporate pyramid with the C-suite.

The intention of Grunig and his supporters was to position public relations beyond advocacy. They felt that self-interest was not the exclusive motivation that PRs should focus on. They said it had to be combined with concern for others and for the impact an organisation's behaviour had on the environment. In short, they wanted to produce a model of PR that could be used to balance corporate self-interest with the public interest, or with the interest of others.

In their 1984 classic *Managing Public Relations*³, Grunig and Hunt put forward four models of public relations which encompassed its historical and current practice:

The first was a one-way communication model based on media relations, or press agency, which seeks to get favourable coverage by either ethical or unethical means, depending on the practitioner's standards.

The second was the public information model which was one-way communication model where the PR acts as a conduit for distributing the client's news.

The third was the asymmetrical model, which could be two-way or one-way, which uses persuasion and manipulation, backed by research, to bend the wills of an audience the client's way in a process.

The fourth (the preferred model) was two-way symmetrical communication in which PRs resolve conflict by promoting mutual understanding and respect between the organisation and their public(s). The objective here, according to Grunig, was to use research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes of ideas, attitudes and behaviours of both audiences and organisations.

The two-way symmetrical model was, of course, an idealised model for PR practice

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³ <http://www.amazon.com/Managing-Public-Relations-James-Grunig/dp/0030583373>

that sought to separate it from its persuasive, propaganda and (supposedly) one-sided roots.

The preferred model was, I acknowledge, a very natural and legitimate attempt by PR practitioners to manage their own reputations. It was, though, not just mistaken, but a dangerous corrosive approach to engaging the public.

What's interesting is how Grunig defined the public, which, he said, "*can be identified and classified in the context to which they are aware of the problem and the extent to which they do something about the problem.*" That effectively conflates the term public with activists, often militant anti-capitalist ones at that. Hence Grunig's style of PR accepts the terms of discussion – the symbols and stereotypes – from the activists. It ends up perverting institutions by urging them to develop their narratives in a way that is out of sync with the public opinion of the silent majority.

The two-way symmetrical model of PR rests on a number of assumptions that require interrogation. It positions PRs as mediators between their clients and their publics. Rather grandly it supposes that PRs are the moral keepers of their organisations. With this model PR gives the target audience equal status to the paymaster. The objective is to ensure that no side dominates the communication process and all sides' views are treated on level terms. To ensure fairness it assumes that both sides agree to abide by a set of rules which can be audited transparently to ensure compliance.

Its proponents claim that this approach is ethical because it empowers PRs to organise how the dialogue is conducted, or at least to negotiate the terms of engagement. Jim Grunig sums it up thus:

“To be successful, however, they [PRs] must be able to convince their client organizations and publics that a symmetrical approach will enhance their self-interests more than will an asymmetrical approach and, at the same time, that it will enhance their reputations as ethical, socially responsible organizations and publics.”

[Two-way Symmetrical Public Relations, Past, Present and Future, Jim Grunig, page 18 in Public Relations Handbook.]

For the model to work, rigorous research of their target audiences' views is required. This information is then used by PRs. Ironically, knowledge is power and the more money one has the more research becomes possible. This fact clearly undermined Grunig's proposition that PRs could mediate effectively between their clients and their publics in an objective and neutral manner. It scuppered the stated intent that neither side should control the perception of the other side's ideas and viewpoints.

Hence Grunig has since been forced to revise his model representation of reality. To his credit, he accepted that his idealistic social perspective of PRs role in society took no account of the PR's motives (PR is paid for by only one side of the relationship). In response, he put forward a compromise that acknowledged mixed motive communication.

Professor Grunig re-cast his theory by arguing that two-way symmetry is a process

not an outcome. He said it was not so much about reaching a consensus with activists as about collaboration and conducting a dialogue. He defined the new take as a discourse designed to balance the private and public interest. Commenting on how the re-jigged models aligned, he wrote:

“Rather than placing the two-way asymmetrical model at one end of a continuum and the two-way symmetrical model at the other end... A public relations strategy at either end would favor the interests of either the organization or the public to the exclusion of the other... The middle of the continuum contains a symmetrical win-win zone where organizations and publics engage in mixed-motive communication.

“With this new model of combined two-way public relations, the difference between mixed motive and two-way symmetrical models disappears. In fact, describing the symmetrical model as a mixed motive games resolves the criticism that the symmetrical model forces the organization to sacrifice its interests to those of the public.”

[Ibid, page 25]

Mixed motive communication then becomes a collaborative advocacy (the cooperative dance as Sandra Macleod likes to say) that defines what Grunig describes as a cooperative antagonism (which he accepts involves two-way asymmetrical communication as being inherent to the process).



photo: East plant of the Texas City refinery
<http://bp.com>

Grunig's philosophical pretensions

The idea Grunig posits as being practical and ethical is that all the players retain their uniqueness and self-interest in the process of negotiation. In support of this notion, Grunig calls for help from a leading Marxist semiotics and structuralist theoretician by the name of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin. He maintained that the essential quality of a dialogue is the simultaneous fusion or unity of multiple voices. However each voice retains its uniqueness and there's an ongoing dynamic tension with and differentiation from the Other. It is from this understanding that Jim Grunig comes to redefine what public relations is about, thus:

"Simultaneous fusion with the Other while retaining the uniqueness of one's self-interest seems to describe well the challenge of symmetrical public relations."

[Ibid, p28.]

This approach to PR supposedly draws on Kantian philosophy. This reminds us, in the tradition of humanism, that stakeholders (any humans, actually, rather than just those PRs define as being relevant to their purpose) are ends-in-themselves, rather than a means to an end. The views of the philosopher Jurgen Habermas are also cited in an attempt to give the model bottom. Habermas maintained that dialogue and not monologue is essential to mutual human understanding.

Grunig, in common with many PR thinkers, mistakenly believes that PR is about establishing mutual understanding between publics and their clients. Actually, PR is about advocacy on behalf of clients and achieving client objectives, something that achieving mutual understanding may or may not help. It isn't necessarily necessary, for instance, that firms understand campaigners or campaigners understand firms. PR's

customers usually hope that – one way or another – their activities come to be accepted. They are dealing with real life challenges; not in a seminar. Nor is it all that obvious that a self-improving firm, anxious to be a good world citizen, should assume that it only has to get into an understanding with its critics to achieve its goal.

Anyway, Grunig has proposed that PRs, their clients and their opponents, retain a get out of jail card. He says that if after dialogue one side cannot accommodate the other it can disengage ethically from the symmetrical process. Of course, failure and the perception of the other side's willingness to cooperate is a subjective matter. This joker in Grunig's pack rather suggests that persuasion and getting one's own way lie at the heart of his game-plan; at the end of the day by any means possible (within the law, of course). Indeed, Grunig tries to make a "virtue" of this motivation:

"...we have stated consistently that the symmetrical model serves the self-interest of the organization better than an asymmetrical model because 'organizations get more of what they want when they give up some of what they want.'"

[Ibid]

However where there's a clash of seemingly irreconcilable forces over issues, such as pro-versus anti-abortionist, ditto nuclear power, ditto GMOs, and so on, Grunig's symmetry runs aground. That's because there really are fundamental differences in the opposing cases: these are existential and can't be moderated away. Hence Grunig accepts that

two-way PR becomes virtually impossible (except at the margins) when negotiating between two publics with diametrically opposed moral viewpoints. This is so with pro and anti-abortionists, for instance, or when anti-trust laws prevent collusion. So it is unfair to say that he is totally idealistic.

It is in the murky space where deals can be made that Grunig's approach to PR becomes risky. Even when compromises can be reached, the obsession with engaging activists in a cooperative dance has very often eaten away at the values, self-confidence, self-belief, integrity and identity of organisations; as it did when BP said it had gone Beyond Petroleum (a change which was both skin-deep and corrosive).

Grunig, rightly in my view, says that persuasion is indeed what PRs do but that the persuasion of PRs cuts two ways:

"If persuasion occurs, the public should be just as likely to persuade the organization management to change attitudes or behavior as the organization is likely to change the public's attitude of behavior."

[Ibid]

Sure, we can all agree that compromise is part of life. Compromise is necessary, and perfectly normal, regardless of the form or model of communication an organisation chooses to adopt. But allowing protesters or activist publics to set agendas risks persuading an organisation to give up something that is perfectly legitimate. Arguably this happened when Shell was persuaded to abandon dumping its Brent

Spar oil platform deep at sea: the upshot was a less ecologically-sound solution. The regulator and the corporation had had the right idea in the first place and trust in both was eroded – not bolstered – by their giving in to emotionalism.

Contrary to what Grunig's supporters say, the asymmetrical models of PR are not awful, if they are good descriptions of how different sorts of PR actually work. But they are a rather clumsy way of arriving at one idea (or ideal) of what PR excellence might be like: a symmetrical two-way process in which power is equal between the two parties, and so is the flow of argument and respect.

This begs many questions. It is indeed often wise for negotiators (which is what PRs are in the symmetrical two way process) to assume that the other party's case is real and serious at least to the party which holds it. But that way lies relativism. It may be intellectually dishonest and dangerous in other ways too (for instance, assuming your opponent is rational and sincere may not be wise when she or he is idiotic, lying and or prone to terrorism). Such relativism, from left-wing critics of Grunig, led some PR academics to make excuses for terrorism, as if supposedly hegemonic asymmetrical PR were to blame:

"Yet we would also argue, in agreement with Deetz (1992) and Philo and Miller (2001), that Western corporate capitalism has succeeded in dominating the range of discourses, and indeed our material practices to such an extent that it is difficult for alternative discourses and practices to rise to any level of ascendancy without violence – as the 9/11

attack on the World trade Center demonstrated. Those attacks can be understood as an attempt to make America and Europe by attention to accumulated Muslim resentments against a history of western prejudice, exploitation, and anti-Muslim foreign policy in the Middle East"

[Source: "From propaganda to discourse", by Weaver, Motion and Roper in *Critical perspectives in public relations*; International Thomson Business Press, London, 2006]

The assumption here is that the "other side's" claims are legitimate. It is also worth noting that no rational explanation has been given for 9/11 and that those that have been provided have been totally contradictory. Terrorism is nihilistic. It is not prone to rational explanation or interpretation. Blaming the West for 9/11 says more about the views of the PRs who make such comments than it does about the motivation of the terrorists.

Grunig is not the problem

I'm almost sorry to focus on Grunig. He is capable of nuance and anyway was not the instigator of the problem he is part of. Rather, he is the clearest in laying out his premises and arguments. His map of the PR dilemmas is the best we have. The kind of ideas which he outlines are indeed the kind which have become all too popular. The view that partisan PR – paid for by bosses of any sort – is unethical is widespread. Even critics of Grunig's theories such as L'Etang share his distaste for positioning PRs as advocates:

"Only if practitioners engage with such [ethical and political] issues can they avoid the charges of superficiality and cynical exploitation of target audiences. The role of public relations itself is shown to be necessarily partisan and, furthermore, by operating on behalf of certain interests, intrinsically undemocratic..."

[L'Etang, J. "Corporate responsibility and public relations ethics", in J. L'Etang and M. Pieczka, eds., *Critical Perspectives in Public Relations*; International Thomson Business Press, London, 1996, pages 82-105]

This quote and stance from L'Etang highlights the major problem within PR circles. It displays an intrinsic dislike of what PR is about: advocacy on behalf of clients. It also reveals a complete failure to grasp what democracy is about and where PR fits in. Democracy is all about the pursuit of self-interest on the part of certain interest groups. Democracy is merely the form and framework within which conflicts and different interests pursue their interests: it sets down the limits to how conflicts are fought and the means for resolving them legally and constitutionally, when persuasion

does not settle the matter of its own accord etc..

None of the above should be taken as an inducement to firms to be anything other than morally alert. Contrariwise: my point is that firm should be more alert, not less. That's why I put such a high value on truth-telling. The *Financial Times's* Martin Sandbu⁴ summed it up well:

"...moral philosophers have granted impunity to lazy thinking. And the result is a debate soaked in such inanities as "giving back to society" or putting "people before profit." Fine phrases, but they mean little and in practice will achieve even less. Most attacks on business immorality conjure up villains in corporate boardrooms plotting their next evil deed. The real problem is harder. Most business people are like most people everywhere: wanting to do the right thing but confused about what the right thing is in a complex world."

He goes on:

"... one may question whether corporate conduct must be justified by its social usefulness. Is business really responsible for the common good? Or is it enough to respect the rights of others while pursuing profits? To ask that question – surely a fundamental one – is to enter a big philosophical debate midstream, for which reading John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant is better preparation than any number of management books."

["Aristotle – the banker's best friend" FT.com, 12th January 2011]

4 <http://martinsandbu.net/>

Setting higher expectations

The real problem is, in my view, that PRs have struggled to talk sense about the world. They have endorsed many of Grunig's premises, even when rejecting his theories. That's because they share many of the protesters' criticisms of modern society. Much of the Grunig and L'Etang take on the world has shifted subtly and resurfaced as stakeholder doctrine, CSR and sustainability mantras. One can read the narrative in Edelman's Trust Barometer conclusions, and in initiatives such as the Stockholm Accords (see [here](#) [here](#) [here](#) [here](#) and [here](#)). It is an outlook which pretends that all stakeholders are equal. It is an arm of PR which claims organisations don't serve their owners or founders or exist to fulfill their core purpose first and foremost.

My point is that PRs need to get beyond recommending to their clients that they outsource their reputations for NGO imprimatur. PRs should also stop advocating that firms and institutions redefine their social purpose to comply with NGO agendas (read soft-left, liberal and often anti-corporate activists). PRs should be helping firms and modern institutions establish their integrity and reputations based on their own merits. Instead of advising the likes of BP to rebrand themselves Beyond Petroleum, they should help them stand for something they really believe in, that reflects their core purpose, such as Better Petroleum.

I say PR's paymasters should ask some tough questions. They should demand more from their highly-paid advocates. It is my argument that PRs have helped create the climate of cynicism and lack of confidence that so bedevils Western society. They have helped put it at a disadvantage to the BRICs by their failure to speak robustly and honestly to their publics. The PR industry's leading academics have in a sense deprived the industry of what it really needs to be taken seriously as a profession: self-esteem and self-respect for its own contribution and that of its clients.

For instance, it has hardly been remarked upon by PRs that supposedly, according to Edelman's Trust Barometer, China has the most trusted government on earth, its businesses are more trusted than the US's and that Russian businesses are supposedly more trusted than France's and Germany's, or that the Russian government is as trusted as the UK's (2010 findings) etc..

It is time Western PR got real. It is time it got beyond trying to construct trite idealised models. PRs should become less defensive and apologetic about managing the messy perceptions and realities that resound in our modern democracies. It is time that PR became part of the solution. It is time our trade grew up.



In countries as diverse as Switzerland and Nigeria, I have worked in environments ranging from multinational boardrooms to environmental disaster zones.

I've managed corporate, crisis and product PR. I have dealt with every kind of media. I've counselled at the highest levels and have sorted things out at street level. I live and work near Zurich, Switzerland.

A little more detail of a campaign life

In the 1970s I campaigned for a socialist Britain (and for various health and transport causes later). In the 1980s I did PR for a union in the finance sector. I suppose that's when I switched sides and started working on PR for the finance industry – just as it went into its late 80s meltdown. But Britain is a robust as well as an argumentative place, and it was surprisingly easy to make my case that mortgages had always been advertised as coming with risk.

Perhaps with a nose for the unpopular, I then went into PR for the nuclear industry – then a pariah. This culminated in 1996 with the life-changing experience of fronting the 10th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. I worked from the site itself, exploding media myths and lapping up close encounters with nuclear heroes.

For the next ten years I did PR for the IT sector, both product and corporate. So I was getting the media to flog our kit for us. And then getting them to buy into my bosses' M&A strategy. There was much less blood on the carpet but I had fun and learned a lot.

Enthused by my IT experience, I started a trading firm a few years ago. I cashed-in quite profitably. And again, I'd learned a lot.

More recently, I have taken this varied experience to work for a Ukrainian "oligarch" who was flirting (quite well) with CSR and then for a burgeoning indigenous PR house in Nigeria as it helped a huge range of firms produce world-class messages. These were vivid experiences, to say the least, and not to be missed.

What does this tell you? I love the challenge of advocacy, whatever the case, product or place. I love a scrap. I am proud of my portfolio CV. It doesn't begin to tell you how much I love team-work. It may be an age thing, but I've also loved mentoring youngsters.

Here's a conclusion. I have learned to respect people who run things, invent things, make things happen – especially when the chips are down.

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