Fringe public relations: How activism moves critical pr toward the mainstream

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ABSTRACT

The dominance of Excellence Theory in public relations theory and research may be eroding as contemporary issues in corporations, including the concern with activist challenges to reputation management and corporate social responsibility, increase in visibility and demand explanation. We argue that Excellence Theory's seemingly reluctant evolution has provided unsatisfactory treatments of concepts like power and activism, even though it has attempted to address some limitations of the symmetrical model's efficacy in responding to activist challenges. Excellence Theory's acknowledgment of once-vilified concepts like persuasion and power sets the stage for critical public relations theory and research to emerge as significantly more capable of addressing activist advocacy and concomitant issues. The paper argues that critical theory, buoyed by acceptance of its key concepts, its increasing access to presentation venues and journals sympathetic to once-marginalized, alternative perspectives, is poised to infiltrate the public relations orthodoxy. This possibility offers hope that once marginalized pluralistic approaches, especially critical public relations, may disrupt the colonization of the orthodoxy and infiltrate mainstream public relations.

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1. Introduction

Fringe science is “a phrase used to describe scientific inquiry in an established field that departs significantly from mainstream or orthodox theories” (Friedlander, 1995). Unlike pseudo-science, fringe science relies on traditional scientific methodologies and research conventions. Although fringe science research is viewed as highly speculative, it has, at times, moved to the mainstream. Examples of this mainstream transition include plate tectonics, chaos theory, and the science of black holes. Fringe scientists are regularly marginalized by scientists immersed in dominant paradigms and have difficulty finding funding for their research. Their research is not taken seriously by the mainstream orthodoxy, perhaps primarily because it frequently challenges accepted ideas.

Critical public relations can be easily classified as “fringe public relations.” It deals in topics that are on the periphery of “orthodox public relations research” and departs significantly from the dominant paradigm of Excellence Theory. Critical public relations researchers have found themselves on the fringe when trying to find venues to present and to publish their research, especially in the US. Many mainstream public relations researchers regard the fringe public relations work as threat, nuisance, or both. But cracks are beginning to emerge in mainstream public relations theory as “fringe” concepts begin to play an increasingly important role in the field. Terms once ignored or shunned, such as activists, persuasion/advocacy, and power, are emerging as legitimate concerns for mainstream public relations research.

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McKie (2005) notes that critical public relations draws upon broader critical theory as articulated typically by European philosophers concerned with issues like power and oppression in society, including, somewhat ironically, Habermas (1984), whose work on the ideal speech situation and democratic communication presaged Grunig’s two-way symmetrical communication model. McKie predicted that critical theory would infiltrate public relations theory and research as it did in organizational and management studies. McKie also attributed interest in critical theory to the internationalization of the field and the growing awareness of diverse philosophical traditions and social theories. In addition, we believe an increasing array of publication outlets, especially those outside the US that are less constrained by the orthodoxy and encompass broader views of public relations, offer the potential to erode the symbolic capital and dominance of the US-based Excellence Theory.

One could argue the dominant paradigm is trying to co-opt terms like power, persuasion and advocacy, and activism. However, an alternative view is that once these fringe concepts establish roots within the mainstream of public relations, no one will be able to control how their influence might re-shape the field. Perhaps attempts to co-opt the terminology of the fringe will instead terra form orthodox public relations. Or the actual outcome may lie somewhere between these two extremes. What seems clear is that fringe public relations is having an effect upon orthodox public relations and is poised to challenge and alter the dominant paradigm. In this paper we posit that the burgeoning interest in activism is the key to fringe public relations’ growing influence on the existing public relations orthodoxy.

The initial part of the article examines what constitutes critical public relations and how its use of the key terms “persuasion,” “power,” and “activism” have positioned it in relationship to the public relations orthodoxy. Initially, these key terms were reviled by public relations orthodoxy and embraced primarily by the critical theorists; however, they are now accepted. We argue that it is the growing power and presence of the idea of activism in public relations and escalating interest in critical public relations that has promoted this sea change. The latter part of the article justifies the role of activists and activism in awakening public relations orthodoxy to power and persuasion. The rapid development of reputation and corporate social responsibility as public relations concerns will help to illustrate the point. Finally, we consider how the spread of activism moves beyond co-optation efforts to a genuine opportunity for fringe (critical) public relations to establish itself firmly within the recognized theories of public relations.

2. Background: key elements of critical public relations

A central point in this article is that critical public relations is currently on the fringe of the field but in a position to become more mainstream. To fully develop this point, we must begin by understanding what constitutes critical public relations before we examine its fringe relationship to the current orthodoxy of public relations research. The definition of critical public relations will introduce the key terms of power and persuasion.

While critical public relations represents a diverse set of views rather than being monolithic, the perspective does coalesce around the idea of power. We can observe the centrality of power when we examine how critical scholars have conceptualized public relations. Motion and Weaver (2005), extending on their work from 1996, used a discourse perspective to argue that public relations is about “the struggle for and negotiation of power” (p. 50). Weaver (2001) noted that critical public relations is “defined by a central concern with theorizing issues of power” (p. 280). Similarly, Edwards (2012) recognized that public relations is value-driven and has the potential to “engender both power and resistance” (p. 19). Rakow (1989) posited that the unequal distribution of power for creating information kept publics in a passive position to organizations. This sampling of the critical public relations literature over a twenty year period illustrates the central role of power in this perspective. A foundational observation from critical public relations is that existing power relationships privilege organizational interests (Motion & Weaver, 2005; Roper, 2005).

Power is frequently linked to Gramsci’s (1971) term hegemony or “domination without physical coercion through the widespread acceptance of particular ideologies and consent to the practices associated with those ideologies” (Roper, 2005, p.70). Public relations practitioners utilize communication to create power. Practitioners create discourses that present and justify their view of the world. When publics accept the practitioner’s view of the world, hegemony is created and publics cede power to the organizations. Organizations can use power to dominate publics and much of the critical public relations research seeks to illuminate this hegemonic domination. However, publics also can use power to transform their relationships with organizations. Drawing upon Foucault (1972), Roper (2012), Motion and Weaver (2005) refer to the ability to transform relationships as the “positive and productive” conceptualization of power.

The ability of discourse to create domination connects power with persuasion. Persuasion is the ability to influence people’s attitudes and/or behaviors. The critical public relations writings are addressing persuasion when they discuss organizational efforts to influence perceptions such as the use discourse to shape public opinion (Motion & Weaver, 2005) or the promotion of the symbolic interests of an organization (Roper, 2012; Weaver, 2001). We are not equating persuasion with efforts to establish hegemonic control but persuasion plays an integral role in the process. Our point is that persuasion, like power, is closely associated with critical views of public relations. Moloney (2006) argues that persuasion is a defining element of public relations because public relations is motivated by the “self-presentation-for-attention-and-advantage” (p. 121). Morris and Goldsworthy (2008) stated “PR is about persuading people to act (or not act) in particular ways” (p. 100). Critical public relations scholars openly recognize that public relations is about persuasion rather using the veneer of public relations as information.
Activists are among those publics that engage organizations. Activists seek to change organizations in some fashion and that requires them to utilize power and persuasion. Typically activists are marginalized by and have much less power than organizations. Through public relations, activists can attempt to build power and to persuade organizations to alter their behaviors and policies (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

Critical public relations has been on the fringe of the field because it asks the tough questions about power, persuasion, and activism that the orthodoxy of public relations chooses to ignore. From Rakow (1989) to Pieczka (1996) to Motion and Weaver (2005) to Edwards (2012) we witness a steady stream of critical public relations work that challenges the orthodoxy to consider power and persuasion in a serious manner. Those challenges set the stage for the considering critical public relations’ relationship with the public relations orthodoxy.

3. The dominant paradigm/orthodoxy of public relations: Excellence Theory

As Botan and Hazleton (2006) observed in Public Relations Theory II, Excellence Theory is the closest the field of public relations has to a dominant paradigm. The effects of Excellence Theory are easily visible in the published literature that comprises the corpus of public relations theory and research. Hence, Excellence Theory is the orthodoxy to critical public relations’ fringe position.

Excellence Theory began life as the four public relations models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and was designed to explain the evolution and practice of public relations. The two-way symmetrical model of public relations evolved into the symmetrical “worldview” (Grunig & White, 1992) and eventually the Excellence Theory (Grunig, 1992a). Table 1 presents a summary of the central concepts that comprise Excellence Theory. As with any theory, Excellence Theory has evolved over the years. What is of interest to us is how Excellence Theory has changed in relationship to three concepts central to critical public relations: (1) persuasion, (2) power, and (3) activism. The changes related to these terms are what suggest an opportunity for critical public relations to gain greater prominence and acceptance in public relations.

The term “activism” emerged early in discussions of two-way symmetrical communication (e.g., Grunig, 1992b), McKie and Munshi (2007) noted how activists were characterized as “obstacles” in the early discussions of two-way symmetrical public relations. Grunig (1989b) stated, “When members of active publics join activist groups, they contribute to the constraints on organizational autonomy that creates a public relations problem and bring about the need for a public relations program” (p. 3). Grunig (1992b) echoed this idea, “This chapter represents an attempt to help public relations practitioners deal in a more than an ad hoc way with the opposition their organizations often face from activist groups” (p. 513). In general, activists are treated as constraints or problems that public relations must address. As Holtzhausen (2007) observed, there was an ongoing hostility toward activists in public relations research.

The incipient discussion of the four models of public relations recognized persuasion as a relevant concept. Scientific persuasion was the hallmark of two-way asymmetrical public relations and practitioners using this model relied upon theories of persuasion to guide their message construction. “They [practitioners] use what is known from social science theory and research about attitudes and behavior to persuade publics to accepts the organization’s point of view and to behave in a way that supports the organization” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 22). In contrast, two-way symmetrical was characterized by mutual understanding and guided by theories of communication. Two-way symmetrical communication reflected a balance in the relationship between the organization and publics in contrast to asymmetrical’s focus on changing public behaviors and attitudes. Although primarily descriptive, the early discussion of the four models still endorsed the two-way symmetrical model. Persuasion was to be avoided in public relations in favor of mutual understanding in part because persuasion was inexorably linked to an organization acting in its own self-interests (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Over time, the criticisms of the two-way asymmetrical model and the persuasion function became more incisive. In 1989, persuasion became linked with manipulation. Here is a sample description: “two-way asymmetrical models intend to persuade or manipulate publics” (Grunig, 1989a, p. 30). On pages 29 and 30 in the 1989 Public Relations Theory chapter, persuasion and manipulation are paired together five times. This description maligns persuasion and positions it as a “devil term” in public relations. Persuasion, now demonized, was a practice to be avoided in public relations and a practice linked to unethical behavior. Additionally, in 1989 the presuppositions of symmetrical and asymmetrical models of public relations, the precursors of worldviews, were detailed. The asymmetrical presuppositions were largely negative while the symmetrical presuppositions were positive. Works by Gandy (1982) and Olasky (1987) were used to indict the two-way asymmetrical
model of public relations. The solution was to use the innately ethical, two-way symmetrical model of public relations. The
demonization of persuasion left only one legitimate alternative, the “inherently ethical,” two-way symmetrical model.

In 1992, the publication of the Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management articulated the case for
the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig, 1992a). In chapter two of the book, the presuppositions were expanded and
were labeled “worldviews.” Again, persuasion was equated with manipulation. The two-way asymmetrical model of public
relations, synonymous with persuasion, was vilified. Here are examples of the blatant negativity associated with the two-way
asymmetrical model:

(1) “the asymmetrical worldview steers public relations practitioners toward actions that are unethical, socially irrespon-
sible, and ineffective” (Grunig & White, 1992, p. 40).
(2) “it is difficult, if not impossible, to practice public relations in a way that is ethical and socially responsible using an
asymmetrical model” (Grunig & White, 1992, p. 40).

In addition, the worldviews of asymmetry are clearly negative while those of symmetry are clearly positive. Table 2 pro-
vides a brief contrast of the two worldviews. Persuasion is negative as it is associated with unethical and socially irresponsible
behavior.

It is in this chapter of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management that power begins to enter the
discussion as Rakow’s (1989) criticism of symmetry is refuted. Her criticism was premised on the unequal power between
publics and organizations. Excellence Theory argues that the power issue has been resolved “because publics have gained
power by organizing into activist groups” (Grunig & White, 1992, p. 47). In addition, Grunig and White (1992) turn to Alvin
Gouldner and structural–functional sociology to support their contention that power is not an issue. They argue that the
norm of reciprocity keeps the more powerful in check. In other words, people do not abuse their power because they know
others may respond in kind. Those who abuse power are punished for those actions. The term power became reserved for
whether or not the public relations department was part of the dominant coalition, those actors in the organization that
make the decisions (Berger, 2007). The discussion of power centers on the public relations department and its connection
to the C-suite, not the relationship between publics and the organization.

In 2001, Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (2001) perpetuated the view that asymmetrical public relations is about behavior and
attitude change—persuasion—and that it poses ethical problems. Dozier et al. (2001) state, “public relations practitioners
are not convincing when defending the ethics of many asymmetrical, commercial campaigns” (p. 235). Persuasive efforts
designed to change the attitudes or behaviors of publics are positioned as unethical. They contend the more appropriate
and ethical approach is to build mutual understanding through the two-way symmetrical model of public relations (aka
Excellence Theory).

Grunig (2001) includes a defense of two-way symmetrical public relations in his chapter for the Handbook of Public
Relations. The stance on persuasion is softened by returning to a statement made in 1984: “If persuasion occurs, the public
should be just as likely to change attitudes or behavior as the organization is likely to change the public’s attitudes or
behavior (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 23). Of course, the interceding years and previous attacks on persuasion conveniently
are overlooked. The statement is true if you refer only the 1984 discussion of persuasion. Still, the writing granted a
grudging acceptance to persuasion as having a legitimate, albeit circumscribed, role in public relations. There is even a nod
to Heath’s (1992) argument that persuasion can be used ethically.

The Handbook chapter recognizes critical scholars such as L’Etang (1996), Moloney (1997) and Pieczka (1996), though
their ideas are given limited attention and their criticisms of the two-way symmetrical model are berated as naïve and
treated in a rather dismissive manner. Their criticisms and specific arguments against Excellence Theory’s claims of the
ethicality and justness of the two-way symmetrical model are largely ignored. Again, the orthodoxy noted the concept of
power but then dismissed it as an overblown concern by critical scholars. The central argument perpetuated by Excellence
Theory is that publics now have as much or greater power than organizations. Publics gain power by becoming activists and
using public relations to create power and to exercise influence over organizations. “These critical scholars seem to ignore
the countervailing power that publics have when they organize into active publics and use tactics such as media advocacy”
(Grunig, 2001, p. 18).

Others have argued that the potential exists for publics to use public relations to create power and gain management’s
attention (Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998). However, these writers noted the potential for the creation of power rather than
assuming every public does have power that is equivalent to or greater than the organization’s. Excellence Theory seems to assume that there is no such thing as a marginalized public. By addressing the power of activists, the concept of power does enter the conversation, even if the theory claims we need not worry about it. Again, power is reserved for whether or not the public relations department is part of the dominant coalition.

The discussion of power again raises the issue of activism. If organizations do not respond to symmetrical communication efforts from publics, those publics become activists and employ asymmetrical efforts to force the organization to engage with them. “If the organization does not respond to the symmetrical initiative, they (activists) use asymmetrical techniques to force the organization to consider the public’s problem also to be its problem (Grunig, 2001, p. 19). Of course the logical recourse is for the organization to then engage in symmetrical communication with the now-activist publics. Excellence Theory acknowledges that activists can be justified in using asymmetrical public relations when their concerns are ignored by organizations. Moreover, activists are considered legitimate publics, not just “obstacles” as they were considered in earlier two-way symmetrical communication focused writings (e.g., Grunig, 1992b).

In a mutation of the original doctrine, they admit that activists can be essential to Excellence. “We hypothesize, therefore, that activism would push organizations toward excellence” (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006, p. 51). Activists are still characterized as somewhat of a problem that stimulates the need for public relations but now gain legitimacy as part of the public relations process. Moreover, it is at the discretion of the organization that activist concerns are considered at all. Even when activists use public relations, managers can ignore activists (Coombs, 1993; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). When organizations do make strategic changes to appease stakeholders, it can be viewed as an effort to facilitate quiescence and maintain the existing hegemony and power structures (Roper, 2005). However, activists are now woven into the public relations orthodoxy even if it is to prove that power is not an important issue for public relations.

3.1. Summary

This section examined how three fringe concepts moved from pariah status or obscurity to become part of the discussion in the dominant paradigm. Initially, persuasion was considered a part of public relations but regarded as simply inferior to mutual understanding. Then persuasion became a pariah equated with manipulation and unethical behavior. Persuasion has now returned to being necessary some of the time – but still is viewed as inferior to creating mutual understanding. There is grudging acceptance of the term persuasion (as perhaps a necessary evil), but not the real practice of advocacy behind the term. Advocacy is a more direct way of saying that those who practice public relations are pursuing self-interests. The emphasis on mutual understanding attempts to downplay self-interest and argue that it is not an important factor in public relations.

Self-interest naturally implicates the question of power. The more powerful actor, usually the organization, is in the best position to pursue self-interests. Arguing that self-interest “is not a problem” means that we need not consider power as an important variable in public relations. Although power is grudgingly considered in the writings of the dominant paradigm, it is treated in a very dismissive fashion when it involves public-organization relationships. Interest in power shifts to focus on whether or not the public relations department is part of the dominant coalition within the organization.

Activists/activism is the final of the three “fringe terms” that are appearing in the dominant paradigm’s writings. Activists receive the most attention and are granted the greatest role of the three fringe terms. Though used as a foil for two-way symmetrical public relations, activists are the most favorably used of the fringe terms. Others have been advocating research (e.g., Karlberg, 1996) and conducting research (e.g., Taylor, Kent & White, 2001) in activist public relations, a point we develop in the next section.

Most critical public relations scholars would not be satisfied with how persuasion, power, and activists are being used in the Excellence writings. One could argue the terms are being co-opted by Excellence Theory to blunt the criticisms advanced by those in critical public relations and to maintain the existing hegemony in public relations theorizing. However, their inclusion in the lexicon of the dominant paradigm makes the terms fair game for further discussion. Hence, we argue, the utilization of these fringe terms provides an opportunity to advance the discussion of a critical perspective of public relations. Activism seems to be the key to taking that next step in advancing the discussion of critical ideas in public relations away from the fringe and moving toward mainstream.

4. Activists: key to advancing fringe public

The ever-increasing value of corporate reputation and corporate social responsibility (CSR) is difficult to deny and is accepted within the orthodoxy of public relations. The two are related in that CSR is becoming an increasingly important aspect of corporate reputation. One view of reputation is that it represents evaluations of how well an organization is meeting stakeholder expectations based on past behaviors (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004; Rechnert, 2003; Wartick, 1992). From this perspective, stakeholder perceptions are central to evaluations of reputation. If stakeholders perceive that expectations are unmet, they are unmet. As the saying goes, “perception is reality.” CSR can be a component of stakeholder expectations. CSR argues that organizations should have a positive net effect on society and consider not only their financial impact but also their environmental and social impacts on the world. The concept of CSR legitimizes stakeholders’ expectations for corporations to meet various social and environmental expectations. In fact, many CSR experts note that CSR initiatives
must be developed through engagement with stakeholders, not simply crafted and implemented by managers (Coombs & Holladay, 2010; McWilliams, Seigel, & Wright, 2006).

The shared roots in stakeholder expectations illustrate how corporate reputation and CSR naturally dovetail. CSR has always been an element of corporate reputation but initially was a fringe element itself. Although the dominant measures of corporate reputation, such as the “Most Admired” lists produced by Fortune magazine and the Reputation Quotient, included social elements, they were dominated by financial elements. CSR is becoming more prominent in corporate reputations and their assessment. As Fombrun (2005) noted, “Companies are increasingly often asked to demonstrate that their actions and policies meet various predetermined social and ethical criteria. Doing so can help build reputation; failing to do so can be a source of reputation risk” (p. 7). Gone are the days of focusing exclusively on the financially oriented criteria. Now, corporate managers must consider the expectations of a wider array of stakeholders when making decisions and planning. CSR is a significant expectation that can have serious ramifications for corporate reputation evaluations.

CSR has become a leverage point for activists because of its link to reputation. Many CSR efforts are designed to benefit corporations by bolstering reputations with little concern for how stakeholders may be affected (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Some unethical corporations try to exploit CSR efforts with attempts to create the illusion of responsibility. Such corporations are charged with greenwashing (overblown claims of environmental efforts) and bluewater (overstated claims of support for the UN Global Compact). From a strategic perspective, the importance of CSR creates a potential reputation risk. As managers tout CSR initiatives to build reputations, their corporate reputations are at risk if the CSR efforts are exposed as washing. Additionally, corporations that seem unconcerned about CSR are likely to suffer reputational damage.

The burgeoning importance and interconnection between reputation and CSR provide an opportunity for activists to gain power and salience in the eyes of organizational management. If activists can threaten the organization’s reputation by exposing an organization as irresponsible (engaged in washing), or as ignoring CSR altogether, managers grant the activists greater salience (Coombs, 2010). Even the white papers generated by practitioners concede that corporate managers are concerned about reputational attacks from activists do not limit their reputational concerns to just CSR (Weber Shandwick, 2009). We are not claiming that organizations and activists have equal power. There is the potential to create power and salience through advocacy; it is not a given. Managers can still choose to ignore activists or respond by denying their allegations or discrediting the activists. Our point is that CSR and reputation provide potential leverage and make activists more salient to corporate managers. If activists can become more important to managers, activists become more significant to public relations researchers as well. There is pressing need for a greater understanding of activists, how they use public relations to gain power, and their effects on critical corporate assets such as reputations and CSR. The latent potential of activists to become more prominent actors in public relations legitimizes them as a focus for study. A case study will help to illustrate this point.

In March of 2010, Nestlé found its social responsibility challenged by Greenpeace. Greenpeace felt Nestlé was moving too slowly in efforts to sustainably source palm oil. Greenpeace’s challenge noted how Nestlé was still buying palm oil from suppliers, such as the Sinar Mas Group, known to be destroying the rain forests and orangutan habitats. Greenpeace launched a social media-based campaign designed to save the orangutans. The initial message was a YouTube video that parodied a Nestlé commercial for its Kit Kat candy bar. Nestlé responded by trying to force the removal of the video from YouTube. Greenpeace claimed Nestlé was trying to censor their message and public interest in the video and challenge increased.

Soon the venue moved to the Nestlé Facebook page. Greenpeace activists began posting messages to the page detailing Nestlé’s irresponsible actions and asking them to end the practices that were killing orangutans by contributing to rainforest destruction (their habitat). Nestlé responded by telling people not to post messages with altered Nestlé logos. This action was labeled censorship to which a Nestlé represented responded: “Oh please. it’s like we’re censoring everything to allow only positive comments” (Nestlé, 2010). This dismissive comment triggered additional complaints about Nestlé being callous and increased interest from the traditional news media. For over two days the activists controlled what was posted to Nestlé’s Facebook page. Nestlé had been hijacked in the social media. Shortly after the Facebook hijacking, Nestlé changed its palm oil sourcing to reflect the demands of Greenpeace. Once the changes were made, the challenge ended and Greenpeace accepted the change as legitimate by thanking Nestlé.

Initially, Nestlé tried to dismiss the Greenpeace concerns about palm oil sourcing. Nestlé had developed a plan to slowly change its palm oil sourcing and stated it would stick with that original plan. Greenpeace’s efforts to damage its reputation by portraying Nestlé as socially irresponsible gained momentum as more people became aware of the negative information through the social media and traditional news media. The reputational threat became too great and Nestlé changed their policies immediately, the behavior change originally proposed by Greenpeace. Its own reputation had been used as leverage against Nestlé to change its palm oil sourcing behavior.

5. Activism: beyond co-optation to opportunity

The concern for activism presents an opportunity for fringe public relations rather than a co-optation of its ideas. Our position is that legitimization of activism as topic for orthodox public relations opens the door for fringe public relations research. A closer inspection of the emergence of activism in public relations research will clarify this point.
5.1. Activist public relations

Beginning in 1996 with Karlberg (1996), there has been a slow but steady call for public relations research to address activism and how activists utilize public relations. Others heralding the call include Dozier and Lauzen (2000), Smith (2005), Smith and Ferguson (2001), Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2006), and Holtzhausen (2007). The majority of these calls emerge from researchers associated with Excellence Theory. Researchers have slowly answered the call. For example, Taylor et al. (2001) analyzed activist use of dialogic principles on their websites. Reber and Berger (2005) analyzed media frames created by activists. Reber and Kim (2006) examined activist use of online newsmrooms and Jaques (2006) noted the similarity between corporate and activist issues management. Holtzhausen (2007; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) has examined activist public relations from a more critical perspective. The research focuses on how public relations practitioners can become activists and change agents. One example would be public relations practitioners becoming internal advocates for concerns voiced by external publics (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). There is an emerging body of activist/activism public relations research and ample space for critical scholars to contribute to the discussion.

5.2. The excellence dialectic

As noted earlier, Excellence Theory claims that activists can help to create two-way symmetrical communication by first engaging in two-way asymmetrical communication as a way to attract the attention of organizational managers. This is a variation of the Hegelian dialectic that has been termed the Excellence dialectic (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). The activists act as the antithesis to the organization’s thesis. Synthesis occurs when the organization considers the needs of the activists. Note that the organization retains its power position because it determines whether or not it will react and how it will react to the activists’ advocacy (two-way asymmetrical communication) efforts. The Excellence dialectic raises concerns about power and advocacy that can be illuminated through the application of critical public relations.

There is no consensus surrounding Excellence Theory’s assumption that “power takes care of itself.” In The Future of Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management, Holtzhausen (2007) notes “Excellence theory does not address the inevitable power imbalance between organizations, which often have unlimited resources, and activist groups” (p. 359). She goes on to emphasize that the power critique of public relations is justified and to note that conflict and confrontation are a part of activist public relations. The Excellence dialectic itself supports her claim.

The Excellence dialectic describes a process. We need to move beyond description to explore the dynamic of how and why the Excellence dialectic occurs. Two overarching questions are:

1. How do activists create effective advocacy messages that successfully draw the attention of organizational managers?
2. Why do organizational managers eventually agree to engage previously marginalized stakeholders?

Exploring the Excellence dialect permits advocacy and power to become legitimate issues for public relations research. We cannot truly explain the effects of activism on organizations without considering the effects of power and advocacy on the dynamic. Critical public relations scholars are positioned well to address the Excellence dialectic because they have the tools to explain advocacy and power.

We are not under the delusion that continued interest in activists and public relations will dramatically move critical public relations from the fringe to the center of public relations orthodoxy. As with activists, the potential for recognition is there, but the potential can always go unfulfilled. For the potential to be fulfilled, critical scholars must maintain their pressure by continuing to produce, to present and to publish quality research. Historically many research outlets had been “unkind” to critical public relations research. However, the orthodox public relations door is now ajar for critical scholars because of the increasing interest in activists. Our view is that discussion of activists plays to the strengths of critical scholars. Only time will tell how far open the door can be moved.

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