The civility of social capital: Public relations in the public sphere, civil society, and democracy

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have analyzed public relations’ role in democracy via proxy concepts like the public sphere and civil society. However, some have critiqued the public sphere on grounds of equal access and portrayed civil society as a guise for first-world imperialism. These critiques have implications for the role of public relations in the public sphere and civil society. This article suggests the normative role of public relations in democracy is best perceived as creating the social capital that facilitates access to spheres of public discussion and in maintaining relationships among those organizations that check state power. To that end, the paper argues that social capital does much to advance public relations theory and prescribe the role of public relations in democracy. Several implications for public relations from a social capital perspective are offered, including the creation of generalized societal trust, the building of cross-cutting or “weak” ties, the engagement of media on behalf of subaltern counterpublics, and the (re)creation of community or a fully functioning society.

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An inevitable problem for considering the role of public relations in democracy is that the concept of democracy is neither clear nor unequivocal. Perhaps given these ambiguities, scholars have considered the facilitative role that public relations plays in the communicative frameworks and processes that are thought to support a robust democracy. Previous attempts to address the role of public relations in facilitating democracy—apart from its inherent connections to a capitalist economy—have approached the subject somewhat indirectly. Namely, scholars have interrogated public relations’ role in democracy via proxy communication concepts such as the public sphere (e.g., Davis, 2000; Hiebert, 2005; Raupp, 2004, 2011) and civil society (e.g., Taylor, 2000a,b, 2009; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005).

These theories, and the role of public relations within them, are not without their critics. Normative conceptualizations of the public sphere and civil society have been criticized as egalitarian, for subjugating the views of marginalized or subaltern publics, and as a covert form of imperialism that forcibly integrates developing nations into a neo-liberal economy (e.g., Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Fraser, 1990). These critiques have indirectly pointed out an alternative framework for public relations in democracy—one that contrives of public relations as building social capital.

This present work argues the normative role of public relations in democracy is best perceived as creating the social capital that facilitates access to spheres of public discussion and policy formation as well as for maintaining networks among those organizations that check the power of the state and maintain social infrastructure. To that end, the paper suggests that the concept of social capital does much for public relations theory development and in prescribing the role of public relations in the public sphere and civil society. Moreover, a social capital perspective helps to answer the critiques of those who have questioned the normative depiction of these theories in advancing democracy and the role of public relations within them.
The article begins by explaining the public sphere and civil society and how public relations has been perceived to contribute to each. Critiques of these concepts are presented. The article then argues that a social capital view of the public sphere and civil society is particularly relevant for public relations to answer these criticisms, and to frame public relations’ contributions to democracy and democratization efforts.

1. The public sphere, publicity, and public relations

Perhaps no other conceptual framework has been so closely associated with the advancement of democracy than that of the public sphere. As originally described by Habermas (1989), discussions in public places among those with common interests flourished in late 17th century Europe. In these spaces, Habermas argued, differences of wealth and status could be temporarily set aside with the goal of reaching a common ground through reasoned debate. While such discussions were primarily among the bourgeois businessmen of the day and centred on matters of commerce, scholars have seized upon the notion of a public sphere of discussion as a conceptual resource in countless studies.

The public sphere has been described as situated between the state and society (Habermas, 1996), yet also as vital to the maintenance of democracy. While the discourse within the sphere does not result in binding decisions, it generates the public opinion that comments on or is critical of decision-making at the state level (Fraser, 1990). It is precisely the non-governmental nature of the sphere that is thought to abet a sustainable democracy, in that it “can serve as a counterweight to the state” (Fraser, p. 75). The public sphere preserves democracy as it helps to balance social stability and change (Castells, 2008). The sphere allows for the discussion of public issues, “a network for communicating information and points of view” (Habermas, p. 360) and “a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state” (Fraser, p. 58). The public sphere checks the power of the state in that it “[subjects] persons or affairs to public reason, and [makes] political decisions subject to appeal before the court of public opinion” (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974, p. 55).

Ideas that survive public scrutiny in the sphere are more likely to affect policy and decision-making as such ideas are likely to advance public interests. A public sphere in which multiple competing voices may be heard is thus central to the functioning of democracy.

Essential to the public sphere is the principle of “publicity,” or as Habermas wrote in German, Öffentlichkeit—the closest literal translation in English being “openness” or “opennicity” (Klienstuber, 2001). Klienstuber explained that the term Öffentlichkeit is concerned with that which is open or accessible to everyone, but also includes meanings like “making something public” or “to discuss in public” (p. 98). Ideas must become public to receive public deliberation. As such, some have taken an instrumental or enacted view of publicity, in that it is something to be used or wielded. Asen (2000) has noted that publics may engage in publicity because they have a belief in the “transformative” power of discourse (p. 429). In Asen’s view, a public can adopt a “publicist” orientation as opposed to an isolationist orientation, which implies proactively engaging in public life via communication. Downey and Fenton (2003) asserted that publics are inherently tied to publicity. Publics are in need of attention in order to sustain their existence, and must work to secure such attention.

If the public sphere can be conceived of as public space for communication, publicity is the attempt to “attract attention for issues and messages in the different arenas of public communication and/or to influence the processes of public discussion” (Raupp, 2004, p. 314). Habermas (1989) asserted that publics must be able to affect a “critical publicity” for a true and fully-functioning public sphere. Such is a premise for the essential role of public relations in the public sphere: to enable publics to affect a publicity such that issues are publicly considered within the sphere.

The public sphere is public work, and public opinion requires public dialogue (Hauser, 1998). Public relations as a public advocacy function (cf. Edgett, 2001) is essential to generate the necessary publicity for individual and organizational participation in public dialogues that eventuate in public opinion. Public relations is necessary to ensure the existence of competing interests in the public sphere, as these interests ensure the fair debate of public issues. Hiebert (2005) has argued that “democracy can only exist when competing interests can occupy the public sphere” (p. 1). Public relations provides the agency to facilitate these competing interests.

Public spheres, however, do not emerge spontaneously. A functioning public sphere, if it works as a successful democratic institution, “represents the potential for people organized in civil society to alter their own conditions of existence by means of rational-critical discourse” (Calhoun, 1993, p. 279, emphasis added). Public spheres of discussion are made possible by civic participation and organizations that are organized favorably in support of issues. Public spheres arise as part of civil society.

2. Civil society and the need for relationships

As Gibson (2001) has noted, “few concepts have captured the imagination of those studying democratization more than ‘civil society’” (p. 51). Theories of civil society have maintained that a successfully functioning democracy requires a set of autonomous organizations that check the power of the state and build social infrastructure (Gibson, 2001; Hauser, 1998). Civil society is enhanced by levels of individual participation in civic organizations and by their political engagement (Putnam, 1993). The people, organizations, and systems of relationships that comprise civil society exist independently and freely operate in a realm outside of government, yet contribute to government’s successful functioning. Civil society exists whenever and wherever voluntary organizations “deliberately try to mould [sic] the governing rules of society” (Scholte,
Civil society is thus considered an essential precondition of successful democratization and “a crucial root to the modern notion of the nation” (Calhoun, 1993, p. 271).

Civil society and the public sphere, however, are not interchangeable or synonymous concepts. As Downey and Fenton (2003) explain, civil society is a mediating space between private and public spheres in pluralistic democracies, “a place where individuals and groups are free to form organizations that function independently and that can mediate between citizens and the state—the place where autonomous public spheres reside” (p. 190). Rather than the single, bourgeois public sphere described by Habermas, it has been argued that civil society fosters multiple spheres, composed of “multiple discursive arenas, each with its own defining characteristics, including the respective publics that emerge in them and whose opinions, however ephemeral, they express” (Hauser, 1998, p. 32). Civil society, when attuned to social problems previously resigned to the private sphere, can “distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere” (Habermas, 1996, p. 367). Civil society is thus “the soil” that nourishes public spheres unique to the common interests of particular civil society groups (Eley, 1992).

Civil society has been described as including a broad variety of organizations such as religious groups, cultural organizations, activist and social movement organizations, professional organizations, universities, unions, media, international donor organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and even sports teams and little leagues. Civil society may serve educational, cultural, or social service goals, but also may strive to affect public policy and government. Civil society is often considered an element of nation-building, wherein international and local actors seek to build democratic principles through creating stable interpersonal and intergroup relationships based on trust (Taylor & Kent, 2006). Accordingly, while the mere existence of civil society actors is one indication of civil society’s ability to affect change, it is widely recognized that relationships among civil society organizations are crucial for collective goal achievement at the local, state, or international level.

Indeed, Hadenius and Uggla (1996) posited that civil society only manifests itself when groups are arranged in reasonably fixed social networks characterized by relationships of affinity and cooperation. When bonds of cooperation are lacking, they surmised, society becomes but a mass of unconnected, atomized individuals incapable of accomplishing shared objectives. Relationship building is consequently seen as a key component of civil society. Taylor (2009) defined civil society as “the process of interactions that lead to relationships, build trust and create social capital” (p. 77). Scholars have thus argued public relations has an important role to play in building civil society and in its continued maintenance (Taylor, 2009; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005, 2011).

Public relations scholars studying civil society have primarily focused on the role of media systems and relationship building among NGOs and donors (Taylor, 2000a; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003, 2005). Taylor (2000a) argued that relationships should be built between NGOs and the media to augment the achievement of development goals. Taylor and Doerfel (2003, 2005) would focus on the relational position of donor organizations and NGOs in civil society networks, highlighting the need for quality relationships of trust and cooperation among agents engaged in nation building. The emphasis on public relations’ role in nation building and democratization has led some to question the assumptions behind civil society, whom it serves, and at whose expense. Such criticisms are similar to those lodged against normative conceptualizations of the public sphere, and are largely couched in terms of the disenfranchisement of subaltern publics.

3. Issues of access and domination for the subaltern

Habermas claimed the public sphere “stood or fell with the principle of universal access” (1989, p. 85). The idea of open access to the sphere is part of the norm of publicity (Fraser, 1990). Habermas suggested that publicity represents some form of public recognition on an issue of shared concern. Issues discussed within the sphere were self-determined as of concern to “everyone.” However, many criticisms of Habermas’ original conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere lay with the idea that the sphere was (and is) fundamentally exclusionary. Scholars have argued that access to the bourgeois sphere was anything but universal (cf. Fraser, 1990). The bourgeois sphere was a restricted demesne of moneyed, landed men. The base theory behind the initial conceptualization of public sphere can consequently be interpreted as exclusionary. Those who were not included in the sphere did not have a voice in the sphere—their concerns were not considered to be “public” because they did not exist.

Along with the rise of the bourgeois public described by Habermas were a host of “subaltern counterpublics,” including women and those from the working class, whose discourse competed with that of the bourgeois sphere (Fraser, 1990). Fraser described subaltern counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate countercodes to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (p. 123). Counterpublics’ discourse can be described as “counter” because it is not part of the dominant discourse. When counterpublics attempt to participate in the public sphere, they are assuming a “publicist orientation,” one that tries to change people’s minds and shape the dominant public’s discourse (Asen & Brouwer, 2001). In their struggles to insert their issues into the dominant public sphere, counterpublics are attempting to enlarge the “discursive model of public space” (Benhabib, 1997, p. 85). Counterpublics, such as activists and social movement organizations, have been recognized to use public relations and issues management practices to engage public spheres and affect issue outcomes (e.g., Crable & Vibbert, 1985; Smith & Ferguson, 2010; Weaver & Motion, 2002).

Like the public sphere, the concept of civil society has been criticized as exclusionary, and as marginalizing the voices of the unempowered. Unlike the public sphere however, criticism has been aimed at public relations’ role in civil society.
Dutta-Bergman (2005) has questioned the role of public relations in civil society nation-building initiatives, claiming that funding from international actors to local NGOs are colonialist, value-laden attempts to impose Western ideals and integrate third world nations into a neo-liberal world economy.

Dutta-Bergman (2005) argued that civil society initiatives in developing nations come at the expense of subaltern publics “who lack basic access to power” (p. 282), and whose voices are subjugated by the imperialistic intentions of civil society partners operating behind the “veneer” of democratization (p. 274). For example, Dutta-Bergman wrote, “people’s voices are adopted and assimilated into bourgeois elite organizations that collude with the United States in propagating the dominance of transnational hegemony” (p. 274), preventing the participation of indigenous peoples in the governance of their own nations. He claimed that subaltern publics are therefore excluded from public spheres of deliberation within civil society: “it is those that have access (and, hence, power) to the dominant public sphere who get to define the discursive space in the public spheres of civil societies” (pp. 285–286).

Dutta-Bergman (2005) rightly pointed out that original conceptualizations of civil society and the public sphere are Eurocentric concepts “loaded with the individualistic biases of European thought” (p. 396). Dutta-Bergman criticized the individualistic, Western orientation of civil society theory, claiming it “[ignores] other forms of community participation that are driven by the greater commitment to the needs of one’s in-group” (p. 272). That said, in his critique Dutta-Bergman adopted a rather narrow view of civil society and the role of public relations within it, selecting to focus largely on the development communication efforts of civil society in nation-building and democratization initiatives. True, much of the research in public relations has centered on NGO and donor relationships in development communication efforts (e.g., Taylor & Doerfel, 2003, 2005). The realm of civil society, however, extends well beyond the scope of development communication and nation-building.

Civil society is a “multidimensional dialogizing space of vernacular conversations” (Hauser, 1998, p. 32), and the “locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meanings” (p. 21) that helps to serve as a buffer between public interests and the state. Without a robust civil society, subaltern publics are vulnerable to authoritarianism, colonialist interventions, the subjugation of their values and norms, and the exclusion from dominant public spheres of debate (Fung, 2003). There is, however, the possibility of contesting the exclusionary nature of the dominant sphere when subaltern counterpublics form around common issues and disseminate a view of an issue as of widespread concern (Fraser, 1990). Counterpublics can participate in the formation of public opinion by achieving a critical publicity that penetrates dominant discourse.

As Dutta-Bergman (2005) himself pointed out, subaltern publics “[engage] in active resistance to the dominant public sphere” (p. 283). The presentation of subaltern or counterpublic views may lead to the expansion of discursive space and the integration of their issues into dominant discourse. The role for public relations in civil society, then, is not necessarily one of relationship maintenance among nation-building NGOs and international donor organizations (although that is still of significant import to public relations scholarship and practice), but more fundamentally to enable publics participation in public spheres of debate—empowering publics to affect the conditions of their existence through effecting a critical publicity (Calhoun, 1993).

Enabling participation in public deliberations is a common theme of scholarship considering the role of public relations in the public sphere, particularly as modern spheres are primarily enacted through mass media and new communication technologies (Davis, 2000; Hiebert, 2005; Raupp, 2011). Hiebert suggested that in a media system in which it is increasingly difficult to gain access, public relations often becomes the only means by which resource-poor organizations can affect public discussion. Media concentration and conglomerates have “tilted the playing field” against organizations with fewer resources (Hiebert, p. 3). And while Internet technologies such as websites and social media platforms have helped to somewhat level this field for publics such as social movement organizations (Coombs, 1998; Heath, 1998), organizations that hold more power resources off-line will grow to dominate online realms as well (Raupp, 2011). The only possible solution to this power imbalance “is public relations, not in terms of spin or propaganda but in terms of developing real public relationships in the public sphere” (Heibert, p. 3). Public relations becomes an essential tool in a communication environment in which it has become increasingly difficult to gain coverage and affect a critical publicity for issues.

Affecting such publicity, however, is dependent on the formation of publics—subaltern, counter, or otherwise—that organize the expression of views through civil society (Castells, 2008). As Castells has argued, without communication in the public sphere among citizens, civil society, and the state, “the whole system of representation and decision making comes to a stalemate,” and crises of legitimacy and authority in state institutions will follow (p. 79). Civil society gives voice to issue stakeholders, empowering them to “shift politics towards a greater participatory democracy” (Scholte, 2001, p. 17). Put simply, publics in civil society help to constitute the public sphere. Fraser cautions, however, that this assumes that a public’s orientation is publicist—that is, a public must be proactively engaged in public life (Asen, 2000). Individuals must participate in voluntary associations in the public sphere’s associative network in order to make issues public—bringing the issue out into the open as related to the public good.

Critics have countered that participation in voluntary or civic associations is largely a Western phenomenon particular to individualistic cultures. Participation in associations is skewed to the educated and the wealthy (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1997), who are committed to individualistic goals of self-development and self-growth (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Dutta-Bergman criticized the Western focus on individual participation in civil society as failing to “see the role of the collective in shaping the values of the social system, a phenomena quite common
in collectivistic cultures” (p. 273). Hofstede (1991) would point out that industrialized, wealthy, and urbanized societies become individualistic, whereas traditional, poorer, and rural societies remain collectivistic. Collectivistic societies exhibit a tendency for strong ties among tight knit social groups, wherein civic engagement is less common (Narayan, 1999).

Yet, it is this very inward orientation that limits the ability of the subaltern in collectivistic cultures to effectively participate in civil society and engage the public sphere, thereby countering the power of the state or other concentrated interests (Warren, 2001). One of the examples of the exploitation of the subaltern by civil society offered by Dutta-Bergman (2005) was in the Philippines, wherein United States support throughout the 1970s and 80s “for democracy-building and civil society development was a mechanism to maintain elite control and prevent broad-based democracy in Philippines in which the people could actively participate in the governance of the nation” (p. 276).

Interestingly, Renshaw (1994) observed that a lack of collaborative relationships among civil organizations contributed to a failing Philippine civil society. As civil society was weak and fragmented it was unable to function effectively. A lack of trusting relationships among civil society organizations in the Philippines—a highly collectivistic nation (Hofstede, 2012)—may help to explain the inability of the sector to resist the interventions of the United States and its cooperation with the Philippine elite. Trusting relationships and mutual collaboration are features of what has come to be known in academic circles as social capital. Social capital gained from a robust civil society is required for publics’ voices to be heard and to offer resistance against “tyrants or authoritarians who might otherwise dominate them” (Warren, 2001, pp. 85–86).

4. Social capital and democracy

In recent years, the concept of social capital has received increased attention among public relations scholars (e.g., Ihlen, 2005; Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Luoma-aho, 2009; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Willis, 2012). According to Putnam (1994), social capital refers to:

> ... the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. ... social capital refers to features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. (pp. 664–665)

Similarly, Coleman (1988) has interpreted social capital as a group level phenomenon that is located in the “structure of relations between actors... it is not lodged in the actors themselves” (p. 98). Social capital is a social phenomenon in that it exists only in relationships among actors.

When social capital exists it is thought to facilitate the production of positive outcomes for individuals or collectivities (Paxton, 2002). The benefits that emerge from relationships high in social capital are not necessarily limited to those who participate in the network. Social capital produces returns for network members and the community in which it resides. High levels of social capital in the form of networks of association, mutual trust, and norms of reciprocity, provide the institutional context for cooperation and solving collective problems (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993). In contrast, low levels of social capital are associated with a Hobbesian state of nature, characterized by competition, and where problems are resolved through struggles or a centralized authority (Brown, 1998; Newton, 1997). Consequently, activity coordination is at the very center of the social capital perspective. Social capital fosters cooperation and provides a framework to achieve social, political, and economic goals that, in its absence, would not be possible.

Paxton (2002) explained that social capital can be more precisely connected to democracy by considering its effect on the creation of “healthy democratic institutions” (p. 256). Social capital can help to create democracy in undemocratic nations through group ties that may organize a critical debate or even large scale collective actions. However, Paxton argues this is predicated on the existence of trusting relationships among individuals and associations. Paxton claimed that social capital “provides a space for the creation and dissemination of discourse critical to the present government. ... and it provides a way for active opposition of the regime to grow” (p. 257). In other words, social capital leads to civil society and public spheres because people trust one another. When people trust one another, they are likely to be more active in their communities, tolerate opinions different from their own, and cooperate with one another (Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 1999).

Civil society, and resultanty robust public spheres, is predicated on high levels of social capital. Social capital and its cultivation is a key ingredient in democracy and democratization. As Fukuyama (2001) argued, “an abundant stock of social capital is presumably what produces a dense civil society, which in turn has been almost universally seen as a necessary condition for modern liberal democracy” (p. 11). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that the relationship is reciprocal—a democratic government is likely to influence levels of social capital (Paxton, 2002). Depending on political and cultural history, states are more or less likely to exhibit support for civil society organizations or view any form of collective activity with suspicion (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001). If the cultural and legal environment is not supportive of civil society, voluntary organizations are “poorly equipped to be effective actors in the public sphere” (Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, p. 812). Autocracy and totalitarianism are averse to social capital (Uslaner, 1999). This can be resisted, however, through the gradual establishment of associations and a public dialogue that is critical of the state (Fung, 2003). Understanding social capital, how it may be built, and its connections to the facilitation of civil society and the public sphere is thus central to questions of how public relations may abet democracy and democratization efforts.
4.1. The civility of bridging social capital in civil society

Social capital is recognized as a multi-faceted relational phenomenon, and some types of social capital are thought to more strongly contribute to a vibrant civil society. There may be high social capital within a tight-knit group, called bonding social capital, which extends benefits to in-group members (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Narayan, 1999). Those groups with bonding social capital tend to exhibit particularized trust (cf. Uslaner, 1999). In such cases, trust is readily extended to in-group members but hesitantly given to those outside immediate communities. Collectivistic cultures thus minimize risk by trusting and cooperating only with their in-group (Uslaner, 1999). They therefore lack in the social capital gained from relationships with groups unlike their own (Alik & Realo, 2004).

Particularized trust also leads to a withdrawal from civic life (Uslaner, 1999). As a result, bonding social capital comes at the expense of establishing cross-cutting ties across different social groups—called bridging social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002)—and the benefits that are believed to accrue from a variety of diverse contacts. Citing Granovetter (1973), Fukuyama (2001) explained that traditional and collectivist social groups are afflicted with a lack of “weak ties” in that they are unlikely to receive information or support from out-group contacts. While in-group ties or bonding social capital may provide immediate benefits for those within the group, such relationships reinforce “pre-existing social stratification, prevent mobility of excluded groups, minorities or poor people, and become bases of corruption and co-optation of power by the dominant social groups” (Narayan, 1999, p. 13). Despite high in-group solidarity, traditional collectivist communities are more likely to be disadvantaged, remain poor, and lack in the connections needed to gain power.

Conversely, societies that have greater generalized trust are able to build relationships outside their in-group, as such trust promotes cooperation and participation in civic life (Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 1999). Narayan (1999) thus argues that for social or collective well-being, a transition must occur from the particularized trust and loyalty that is exhibited in collectivistic cultures to building relationships with others that are different from the self. It is through participation in trusting relationships with unlike individuals that people “change values, preferences, and the capacity to act” (Paxton, 2002, p. 258). Generalized trust plays a key role in creating a society wherein people are likely to take an active role in their community, voice concerns in the public sphere, and participate in reasoned debate.

5. A role for public relations in democracy

Willis (2012) has asked how public relations can engage with community stakeholders to create environments conducive to cooperation and problem solving. The answer may be through the encouragement of social capital and a vibrant civil society. Civil society is not necessarily imposed on nations via external actors. Public relations in international civil society interventions, while an important area of study, is but a small part of the practice’s role in facilitating democracy. Civil society is better treated as a phenomenon internal to societies and nations—one that is dependent upon the availability of social capital to publics.

Social capital is a precondition for civil society. The fostering of social capital is the raison d’être of public relations as the function is responsible for the cultivation of collaborative relationships. Social capital requires work, and should not be considered a forgone conclusion in any community (Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011). Public relations can contribute to the creation of an environment of mutual trust, reciprocity and engagement. It is not enough that organizations simply hold a town hall meeting, “there must first be the communal social capital to underpin it” (Willis, 2012, p. 121). The creation of social capital can come from the top-down, as in state or international encouragement of civil society. However, social capital more commonly comes from the bottom-up, from the organizations and individuals that enact civil society. Luoma-aho (2009), extracting from Putnam, claimed how people behave is more important than how organizations and governments are managed. Much of the work in creating social capital, therefore, must start with people and the creation of generalized trust.

5.1. Building trust, shaping identities

As Simmel (1950) wrote, trust is “one of the most important synthetic forces within society” (p. 326). Unsurprisingly, then, trust has proven to be a reliable measure or indicator of social capital over time and across the world (Halpern, 2005). Trust is a precondition of any form of behavior (Rossteutscher, 2008). Without trust there are low levels of civic engagement (Putnam, 1993, 2000). Thus, trust as a social norm is essential to reciprocity and social support—trust begets trust. This suggests that generalized reciprocity involves risk and uncertainty. With trust, risks are deemed acceptable based on the premise that others will not let us down. Consequently, a group that has high levels of trust embedded within its network is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without such trust (Coleman, 1988). Trust can thus be conceived of as a precondition for social capital and as its outcome.

Trust and cooperative relationships are at the foundation of stable democratic nations (Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). That said, how to encourage generalized trust in a society previously marked by its absence is a difficult endeavor. (Re)building trust in society likely requires the use of both interpersonal and mass communication channels (Botan & Taylor, 2005). Increasing trust in out-group members requires a positive exposure to and tolerating people that are different (Uslaner, 1999). Establishing trusting associations in every day social interactions helps to spread the potential for cooperation beyond the in-group (Fukuyama, 2001). Trust in other members of a society can kick off a “virtuous cycle” wherein relationships...
lead to social cooperation (Puma & Koelbe, 2009). Small scale cooperative activities are thus likely to lead to repeated cooperation. The simple act of getting people involved in associations, of any sort, helps to build social capital and leads to further participation (Putnam, 2000). Organizations should thus work to encourage civic engagement to foster a vibrant civil society.

To that end, public relations can serve as a cultural interpreter between diverse ethnic, cultural, religious, or class-based groups. Cultural-specific institutions have culturally-specific rhetorical frames (Fraser, 1990). Organizations must have multi-cultural literacy to communicate across such groups and work to build partnerships. Moreover, public relations campaigns can work to increase tolerance across different cultural groups (Taylor, 2000b). For dissimilar groups to move past their differences and recognize common interests is an essential first step towards building generalized trust and establishing out-group ties.

Relationships across different social groups lead to the collective good of a community (Narayan, 1999). Civil society requires “bridging” social capital. Strategic relationship building should therefore encourage intentional collaborative actions among actors outside their homogenous social networks. Bringing together diverse social actors requires a thorough assessment of the environment and insight into civil society partners that would benefit from working together. Structural holes represent a lack of connections among actors in a network, a separation between clusters of individuals or organizations that have the capacity to work together (cf. Burt, 1992). Filling structural holes and building relationships among unconnected actors can add value to a network by brokering valuable network information and resources (Stohl & Stohl, 2005). Those who bridge structural holes can communicate differences of opinion, help network partners to reason from the interests of others, and establish mechanisms that build trust and reputation among actors (Burt, 2002, p. 229). Such behaviors are characteristic of effective public relations in organizations.

Further, public relations creates interorganizational relationships and dependencies that empower civil society organizations to shape the policy process. Establishing weak or cross cutting ties is akin to building coalitions. It is not enough that interpersonal contacts and acceptance is established across different social groups. For civil society to flourish and produce a critical publicity in a sphere that critiques or promotes certain policies, organizational and institutional alliances must be formed. For this purpose, coalition-building has been recognized as an essential public relations technique for activist organizations, whose views are often regarded as “counter” or outside the dominant sphere.

For resource-poor agents that represent the views of the subaltern, a collaborative civil society must be established in order to affect a critical publicity and penetrate the dominant public sphere (Verba et al., 1997). Indeed, Fox (1996) explained how poor indigenous groups in Mexico challenged the state through building networks with other organizations, politicians, and legitimate social actors such as the Catholic Church. Public relations has what Sisk (1999) called an implicit “convening power”—the competence to attract relevant parties to work together. Establishing relationships built on common interest and helping to coordinate activities in civil society is a clear path for public relations in democracy. Public relations also has a more practical role in facilitating organizational participation in public dialogue.

5.2. Media relations and the public sphere

The media relations function of public relations has been touted as integral to civil society (Botan & Taylor, 2005; Taylor, 2000a). Media, as a partner in civil society (Taylor, 2009), must be a trusted social institution for a fully functioning public sphere (cf. Botan & Taylor, 2005). The mass media may help to generate generalized trust in society and in government (Newton, 1997). Some have discussed the capacity of media to integrate society and increase levels of political knowledge and competence (e.g., Dalton, 1988; Inglehart, 1988). The ideal role for media in environments characterized by long periods of distrust in government and in others is to help restore the ability of individuals to trust one another, their representative institutions, democratic processes, and government (Rose, 1994).

Public relations scholars have argued that practitioners can work to improve public trust in media through encouraging greater transparency, refusing to pay bribes for media coverage, and working towards making public relations a legitimate and responsible profession (Klyueva & Tsetsura, 2010; Tsetsura & Gryanko, 2009). Public relations may help to establish trust in organizations by working with local and alternative media, as these are more trusted than state media or local government officials (Botan & Taylor, 2005). Further, Rojas, Shah, and Friedland (2011) explained that news media consumption can amplify social integration. Public relations can thus promote a plurality of views in the media through the representation of subaltern interests.

Public relations can bring the concern of subaltern or counterpublics from the periphery of public spheres of debate to the core of issue discussions through relationship building strategies and the employment of publicity tactics. The act of public communication is part of the public sphere (Downey & Fenton, 2003). For civil society organizations like NGOs to build support for their causes, and given that modern public spheres are primarily constituted through mass media and new communication technologies (Habermas, 1996; Hiebert, 2005; Raupp, 2011), they must engage the mass media to communicate publicly. As Castells (2008) argued, it is through the media that civil society organizations reach broader publics, mobilize support, and put pressure on governments, corporations, or other actors.

Supplying media with a steady stream of information subsidies may be one way for counterpublics to establish themselves as legitimate participants in public discourse (Davis, 2000). Other, more extreme public relations tactics have been used by activists to gain public attention. For example, DeLuca and Peeples (2002) focused on the concept of the “image event,” where activists at the 1990 WTO protests in Seattle staged events in the hopes of attracting media attention. They suggested
that such events are a form of democratic participation accomplished via the mass media. The events appear on “public screens,” or the technologies that abet the circulation of images and words in the public sphere. Image events, they argued, are designed to generate publicity. Activists use this publicity to perpetuate their issues and issue frames, helping to shape public opinion and “hold corporations and states accountable” (p. 134).

While image events may be publicity stunts to capture media coverage (Hallahan, 2001), image events can also be legitimate ways to communicate with publics and to gain attention for issue discussions when other means of communication fail. Image event activities like protests and boycotts are directed at swaying a “largely indifferent public” who are uninformed about a particular issue (Murphy & Dee, 1992, p. 11). Through activism, public relations can help to “re-invent” democracy (Holtzhausen, 2000).

To that end, scholars have argued that for public relations to contribute to democracy, it should cease to be regarded as purely an organizational function (Holtzhausen, 2000). Werder (2005) suggested that scholars have taken an organization-centered as opposed to a communication-centered approach to understanding the nature of public relations. To fully appreciate the role of public relations in democracy, we must understand public relations as a rhetorical communication phenomenon practiced by any social actor—individual or organizational. Davis (2000) has asked: “Is public relations simply a means by which corporate or state sources can further dominate access and manage media agendas?” (p. 40). The answer to Davis’ question should be an unequivocal “no.” However, questions of whether public relations is practiced outside of business and if public relations can serve society remain contested issues (cf. Heath, 2006). Heath has called for “a paradigm that acknowledges that all types of organizations engage in and have need for public relations” (p. 95). Public relations, as a meaning-making and relationship-building function (Weaver & Motion, 2002), when practiced by any social actor, can strive to “re-invent” democracy when it facilitates social capital among emergent publics, thereby building relationships and a collaborative civil society. Public relations in democracy may be understood as building communities so that individuals and organizations work together for the public good.

6. Building community, making society “function”

As early as 1988, Kruckenberg and Stark argued that “public relations is better defined and practiced as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community” (p. xi). Heath (2006) recognized the collectivistic nature of societies, and that public relations can work to create agreement, permeability, and trust among collectivities so that meaning is shared, risk is managed, and activities are coordinated. Public relations can make society more fully functional when it is used as a force “to foster community as blended relationships, resource distribution, and shared meanings that advance and yield to enlightened choice” (Heath, p. 97). Public relations, when it builds collective trust, cross cutting relationships, and facilitates a plurality of views creates the social capital requisite for communities to form and societies to function.

In the absence of an effective and supportive state, civil society groups, including those NGOs sponsored by international actors, have an important role to play in facilitating social capital (Sisk, 1999). Organizations in civil society can use rhetoric and public relations to facilitate organizational and community relations (Taylor, 2011). Civil society organizations also engage in public relations through establishing and managing relationships for the purpose of achieving collective goals. Moreover, individuals also enact public relations principles via their participation in various social groups (Holtzhausen, 2000), through learning about one another and adjusting to a changing social environment (Taylor, 2011). Public relations is at work whenever and wherever cross-cutting ties and mutual trust is established between groups in civil society.

In turn, civil society and robust public dialogue can contribute a more democratic state (Paxton, 2002; Uslaner, 1999). Social capital builds connections, perpetuates trust, and facilitates coordinated action. The maintenance of social capital among publics is needed to ensure they can continue to come together in civil society, meaning the work of public relations is never quite done. While large scale campaigns, international nation-building efforts, government relations, and public diplomacy are, no question, connected to democracy and democratization, building communities and making society more fully functional may be the ultimate contribution of public relations to democracy.

7. Conclusion

Several terms in the title of this article—“civil society,” “public sphere,” and “social capital,”—are heavily contested. There is a vast and complex literature that considers each as individual and intertwined concepts. While it is well beyond the scope of this work to resolve these long-standing disagreements, this article has attempted to theoretically link each concept to one another, and unpack the implications for public relations. At its heart, this article has considered what function public relations, as an applied communication discipline, may play in sustaining democracy beyond enabling capitalist economies.

The answer may be simply in rethinking public relations as a community building function. Communities and societies require social capital. Social capital is a necessary precondition of the formation of civil society and public spheres of democratic debate. As Putnam (1993) has acknowledged, “building social capital will not be easy, but it is the key to making democracy work” (p. 185). As a means to create shared meaning, voice collective opinion, and build relationships among groups, the burden of social capital creation lies squarely in the court of the public relations. In making society a better place to live, public relations can contribute to democracy.


