

Public relations theory: An agonistic critique of the turns to dialogue and symmetry

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Abstract

This is a conceptual paper that seeks to apply agonistic theories of democracy to critique the embracing of dialogic communication in public relations theory. Several strands of scholarship, despite their vastly different starting points and epistemological assumptions, have converged on advancing dialogic forms of communication as representing the best normative theories for shifting practice toward what might be considered civic, democracy-friendly norms. As a consequence theorising has emphasised compromise and consensus which pressurises practitioners to adopt ostensibly non-partisan styles of communication. In contrast agonistic democratic theory elevates the value of permanent contest, dissensus and performance in vibrant public spaces which expose and test the legitimacy of those who hold power and privilege. However, the disputes in other academic fields between advocates of deliberative and agonistic approaches have up to now been largely absent in the public relations literature. This paper uses agonistic theory, particularly the work of Chantal Mouffe, to critique some of the assumptions that have been used to apply to public relations a) Habermasian deliberation b) two-way symmetrical communication. Finally, the paper discusses the value of the agonistic framework for building new models for understanding the forms of public relations that would support democratic practice.

Key Words: public relations, democracy, agonism, dialogue, deliberative, hegemony

Introduction: 'public relations democracy' and the dialogic turn

The longstanding stream of debate on how to establish theories for understanding and testing public relations' impact on democratic societies has revolved around the question of to what extent it has escaped from what Coombs and Holladay (2013) describe as its 'wicked roots'. The global growth of public relations has prompted academic and public anxieties as its reputation is tarnished by historical associations with propaganda and other forms of unethical communicative practice. In recent decades several paradigms of public relations scholarship, despite their vastly different starting points and epistemological assumptions, have converged on advancing dialogic forms of communication as representing the best normative theories for shifting practice towards democracy-friendly norms. A core objective of this paper will be to apply agonistic theories of democracy to critique this apparent stampede towards embracing dialogue or symmetrical communication.

Public relations theorists who have clustered around the systems theories work of James Grunig have defined and categorised propagandistic communications as not constituting authentic practice. But for scholars working within critical and political economy frameworks modern day practice is still equated with deceptive communications that enable the extension of corporate power by dominating decision-making environments (Dinan and Miller 2007; Miller and Dinan 2008). Awareness of this external critique has provided an impetus for normative theorising. While it may be said that communication ethics has been a constant, almost existential, theme in public relations scholarship, inside the field's corpus the incorporation of hegemonic notions of power has been a road less well travelled.

If we assume and accept the significance of promotional cultures as being central to the development of contemporary democracies and their associated media systems (Davis 2013) then there is a clear imperative to theorise public relations' normative roles from a desire to embed democratic principles into both scholarship and practice. Situated within what Davis (2002) once termed *public relations democracy* the rationale for this paper recognises that, aside from journalism, public relations is the one form of communication practice that self-consciously understands its objectives as influencing the structures and content through which issues are mediated. This function of public relations in constructing discourses led Motion and Leitch (1996) to categorise its practitioners as 'discourse technologists', while Somerville (2011) identifies their role in strategically deploying the rhetorical devices of framing and storytelling, with Hallahan (1999) suggesting that practitioners have developed the role of 'frame strategists'. While journalism and public relations create discourses, the balance between the two has begun to shift significantly. In 1996 Ewen was already describing American society as being public relations-saturated while Moloney's (2006) UK study argued that public relations was embedded into society determining the style and characteristics of civic discourses.

At this point it is important to clarify that although public relations may have popular associations with publicity and promotion, and these are certainly widely practised, as L'Etang (2008) has argued the distinctive features of public relations relate to how it has been characterised by communication that involves '...exchange of ideas either in response to, or to facilitate change. It entails argument and case making. It is thus intrinsically connected to policy initiatives...and responses to these by organisational actors...' (2008: 18). Incorporating the totality of the phenomenon also requires going beyond the typical critical research focus on corporate public relations recognising that NGOs, charities, professional associations, trade unions, social movement and protest groups are all prolific producers of public relations content and employers of practitioners.

In its formative stages as an academic field public relations was dominated by functionalism which oriented towards researching how public relations might help organisations achieve their goals, motivated by a desire to provide an evidence base for public relations' acceptance as a senior management discipline (Edwards 2012). The dominance of this paradigm has meant that peer reviewed publications have rarely privileged civic-democratic concerns (Davidson 2015). When researchers have sought to build models for public relations' constructive contribution to civic society both functionalist and more critical scholars have tended to converge on advocating forms of dialogic communication. Indeed, Pieczka (2010) has argued that dialogue has been at the centre of three decades of public relations theory and observed as ubiquitous in public relations scholarship by Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012). As a consequence normative theorising has emphasised compromise (Dozier et al., 1995), consensus (Burkart 2007) and engagement (Taylor and Kent 2014) which Lane (2014) has observed combine to put pressure on practitioners to demonstrate their ability to adopt ostensibly non-partisan styles of communication. In some ways the shift to dialogue in public relations scholarship mirrors the trends in related academic fields. In political philosophy there is a long tradition of the advocacy of deliberative forms of democracy that posit the value of dialogic communications and consensus seeking in the interactions between institutions and citizens (Dryzek 2000; Gutmann and Thompson 2009). In contrast agonistic democratic theory elevates the value of permanent contest, dissensus and performance in vibrant public spaces which expose and test the legitimacy of those who hold power and privilege.

The etymology of agonism comes from the ancient Greek word *agōn* which was used to indicate a contest or struggle. In introducing agonistic theories of democracy it is useful to draw on Wenman's (2013) construction of its basic elements. Firstly, agonism builds on constitutive pluralism, that is to say that there not only must be recognition of the difference between groups, but also the difference in circumstances that forges the identities of groups and individuals. Agonists to varying degrees assume that no transcendent measures or rational thought frameworks can be universally applied to adjudicate between conflicting values. A tragic vision of the world is another of Wenman's basic elements of agonism, a disposition of political realism that envisions conflict, suffering and strife as inevitable. Central to this paper's critique of the dialogic turn in public relations theory is how agonism accepts conflict as a democratic good. In Mouffe's work (2000) conflicts and confrontations are healthy indicators of a democracy animated by pluralism in contrast to hierarchical or authoritarian modes of governance that seek to shut down public spaces or becalm civic discourses. Agonism provides a conceptual framework for understanding a constructive role for forms of public relations practice that enable transparent rhetorical rivalries as well as acting as a catalyst for tangible contributions to the public good.

This paper examines two dialogic models in public relations theory. Unlike other academic fields to date public relations scholarship has not benefited from the incorporation of agonistic theory to test the limits of dialogue, or to develop alternative models that embrace the ethos of agonism. This paper makes its original contribution by demonstrating the value of an agonistic framework for critique, but also for building new theories and models for understanding the forms of public relations that would support democratic practice. The next sections of this paper explore classical and more emancipatory forms of contemporary agonism before applying these frameworks to critique how Habermasian and symmetrical models of dialogue have been applied to public relations. The final section will advance a discussion of how agonistic theories can be synthesised with existing models of to provide a new paradigm for understanding public relations' role in democratic theory.

Classical and Contemporary forms of Agonistic Democracy

Classical Agonism

Agonism is rooted in classical Greek culture with some important differences in emphasis to more modern forms of radical democratic agonism. The origins of classical agonism lie in sporting tournaments where the contestants strove to excel in fair and open competition. This tradition evolved into other forms of public contests involving rhetorical or symbolic confrontations enacted through performances of music or drama (Kalyvas 2009). Position and acclaim can be won, but the winner accepts their glory is likely to be temporary.

Central to classical agonism is the idea that protagonists perform openly in public, seeking to win acclaim and admiration. As Barker (2009) argues the *agōn* embedded competition into institutions and power was accepted as the outcome of a continual struggle where the losers were able, indeed encouraged, to challenge the winners to defend their position. Barker also describes how in public assemblies there would be a placing of symbolic goods in the middle of the gathering. This was to emphasise that all who enter the debating space were equals and while prizes and acclaim could be won by those who sought them, they could not be owned by them. The significance of such practices for agonists is the constant challenging of those who hold influence and the potential to hinder the solidification of power relations (Kalyvas 2009). Bonnie Honig's work built on classical agonism through her interest in the role of game playing and performativity, as when applied as enticements for citizens to become engaged in modern democracies. For Honig the value of classical agonism is its commitment to open public discourses that are able to contest closure and domination by a single or overlapping forces. After all: 'Who wants to compete if the odds of winning are already known to be null? A permanent victor causes a loss of interest in the game' (Honig 1993: 530). This performative aspect is also present in Hannah Arendt's agonistic writing. Arendt's writing on democracy was attracted to the value of agonistic encounters as joyful spaces of freedom full of passion for ideas, where the public coming together with others assisted in acquiring identities and nurturing esteem (Roberts-Miller 2002). Arendt is significant for her association of freedom with agonistic competitions for recognition and rule in public spaces. Whereby freedom is enacted when people come together to contest socially constructed processes that have been made to seem as natural necessities (Tully 2008). Arendt (1958) articulated idealised public spaces as places where protagonists would constantly seek to distinguish themselves from others through their unique deeds or achievement. As such classical agonism categorises excellence as being achieved through public evaluations of civic contributions to good of one's city (Kalyvas 2009).

Contemporary Agonism

Contemporary agonism is characterised by a tendency to depart from the emphasis in classical agonism on the individual toward a focus on the competition for power and recognition between groups. The stress shifts towards what might be considered more modest goals, centred on fostering the ability of citizens to make visible and then disrupt hegemonic power relations (Kalyvas 2009). These more emancipatory forms of agonism represent attempts 'to lay bare and redress the harms, injustices or inequities caused by exclusions and restrictions of pluralism' (Fossen 2008:377), with further value gained through nurturing the ability of citizens, particularly marginalised groups, preventing harmful social relationships becoming naturalised or rationalised (Connolly 1991). As Schaap (2009) notes in civic contexts agonism elevates plurality and contest above neutral deliberation and public consensus.

Mouffe is an influential figure in contemporary agonism and has consistently built her writing upon the assumption of *radical negativity*, the impossibility of any society being beyond division and power as every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities (Mouffe 2013). Orders are not natural or rational, they have been established in the contingencies of a particular time and

place. However, the original political contingency of social practices can be forgotten and become *sedimented* (Mouffe 2007). Consensus and agreements are functionally important, but for agonistic democracy they must be recognised as temporary and open to challenge. So, there are no assumptions that fully rational or non-hegemonic consensus can be established. Instead democracy thrives when the hegemony of groups and institutions can be challenged through vigorous but tolerant disputes among passionately engaged citizens (Björgvinsson et al., 2012).

Contemporary forms of agonism provide a framework for challenging what Karppinen (2007) has termed the *naïve pluralism* frequently found in public relations and wider communication studies, where scholars assume that successful ethically-grounded communications are those which eliminate resistance and conflict in favour of building consensus or consolidating communities. In emerging democracies or highly divided societies communicators can apply agonism to prevent recourse to violent conduct and embed democratic practice (Tully 2008). In older democracies its utility comes from providing strategies which can attempt to address the root causes of civic disengagement, even fatigue with democracy.

Postmodern Agonism

The classical origins of agonism clearly tell us that it does not automatically sit within postmodern frameworks, but a distinguishing context of Mouffe and other contemporary agonists is their incorporation of postmodern sensibilities and assumptions into their theory building. Mouffe's notion of the constitutive outside and the construction of us/them identities, whereby the creation of a group identity incorporates the establishment of a relational dimension, draws on Derrida, particularly his concept of *différance* (Derrida 1982). Mouffe's theorising has also been influenced by Derrida's poststructuralism and the acceptance that subject positions that allocate meaning to social categories are discursively formed. Consequently Mouffe has moved away from placing class at the centre of progressive politics. In the process she now combines post-structuralism with Gramscian notions of hegemony, to conceptualise forms of collective democratic action under the conditions of insoluble pluralism (Wenman 2013). This model of agonism also draws on postfoundationalism in that it presumes within all claims of authority there will be elements of their founding narrative which its proponents believe to be based upon incontestable logic. As not all citizens will accept this logic the enactment of these claims will always entail an assertion of power.

The postmodern dimension to contemporary agonistic theorising invites some consideration of Derina Holtzhausen's valuable contributions (2000, 2002, 2012) that have sought to apply postmodern theory to public relations. An important influence on Holtzhausen's postmodern model of public relations is the work of Lyotard, particularly his critique of consensus. Holtzhausen uses Lyotard as an exemplar of postmodern angst in regard to any dominant ideology, or in Lyotard's language, metanarratives (Lyotard 1992). From Lyotard we see a rejection of universal norms or values which would enable a reconciliation of the multitude of language games between individuals and groups. Social relations are populated by numerous *differends*. Lyotard defines this concept as a case where 'the differend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom.' (1988:9). There are genres of discourse, and within each genre particular phrases or language are required in order to be intelligible. A meaningful concept in one genre may be unintelligible in another. Some genres, such as economics, enjoy a hegemonic relationship over others. So, it is often the case that groups who wish to report an injustice must do so in the fiscal language of economics. If they cannot express their claims for redress in this language, a differend has been created (Held 2005). This Lyotardian grounding helps us understand why Holtzhausen (2000) has concluded that a postmodern form of public relations would orientate to nurturing

dissensus as being more appropriate than seeking consensus or symmetry. Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) suggest the dangers of public relations striving for consensus are the resulting reaffirmations of the positions of the most powerful, and argue dissensus is a powerful force for change, with new ideas and meanings created through exploring difference and opposition. The role of practitioners would not be to strive for consensus but to identify the *tensors* (points of conflict) between the organization and its publics. Through the identification of tensors, practitioners would be enabled to promote situations in which new meaning is created, utilising difference and opposition as a creative resource (Holtzhausen 2000).

Both agonism and Holtzhausen's postmodern model converge on the necessity of nurturing dissensus if public relations is to support the entrenchment of democratic values. That said, there are some important distinctions to be made between a Lyotardian approach and the agonistic model that has been built by Mouffe. To understand the divergence we need to differentiate between post-foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. Anti-foundational theorists, such as Lyotard, see all narratives that seek to order social relations as inherently oppressive and they assume all hegemony-seeking narratives will be hostile to difference. Post-foundational theorists agree on the problem of exclusion, but accept that some form of ontology, even if only adhered to in a weak manner, is required to ensure social order or democratic politics are possible. This is a rejection of the idea that there should be no foundations, instead insisting on the acceptance of their contingent nature (Marchart 2007). As Mouffe is not an anti-foundationalist, she eschews celebrations of single issue politics, and continues to emphasise the importance of collective struggles and the necessity of articulating policy agendas. While Mouffe might join with Lyotard's critique of Habermas' foundationalism, she has deliberately distanced herself from Lyotard's notable assertion that the horrors of Auschwitz had killed the project of modernity, calling this 'sheer pathos' instead calling for the use of postmodern theory to help extend democracy and 'the sphere of equality and liberty to many more social relations' (Pluralt 1996: 45).

The next two sections will apply an agonistic critique to applications of dialogic theory that have sought to develop frameworks for creating normative conceptualisations of public relations as a non-propagandistic, ethical form of strategic communication. The first is what might be termed the civically-oriented *deep* dialogue based on the work Habermas that has been intermittently applied to public relations, with the following section considering the widely adopted management-oriented *shallow* dialogue advanced under the aegis of two way symmetrical communications.

An Agonistic Critique of how Habermas has been applied to dialogic models of public relations

An early and significant attempt to incorporate Habermas came from Pearson (1989) who believed it offered a solution to what he saw as the problem of ethical relativism in public relations practice. At this early stage Pearson made explicit links between Habermas and the concept of symmetry being developed by J.Grunig, believing these were couched in same language of a process where source and receiver become indistinguishable when they are equal participants in a dialogue. For Pearson the focus of research needed to move away from attempting to judge right and wrong policies, but instead develop processes of dialogic communication that would elevate ethical norms and privilege compromise. Pearson's approach resonated with Leeper (1996) who also agreed that the work of Habermas could be linked to symmetry through the emphasis on dialogue and coorientation. This was because there was a shared focus on the importance of communications seeking to develop understanding between organisations and publics. These assumptions found a new extension when Burkart (2007) attempted to use them in developing a model of 'consensus-oriented public relations'. Burkart drew on Habermas' theory of communicative action to explore how truth claims could be introduced and then contested by the public. This consensus orientation would be

supported Burkart claimed through practitioners conducting evaluations of the levels of consensus achieved in terms of the communicator's trustworthiness and the level of consent on proposed project goals or values. Burkart endorsed the value of this approach through how it might be used to avoid escalation of conflicts in a process that sought to move toward a rational consensus of 'responsible citizens'. A more critical application came from Holmström (1997) who drew on Habermasian concepts to categorise public relations as emanating out of the *systems* world of technocratic goals that orientate to the vested interests of those who hold money and power. This was problematised if public relations goals become functionally detached from the *lifeworld* of family and culture. Holmström argued that the normative task for public relations under these assumptions is the difficult task of reconciling logics and re-establishing the coupling between the *lifeworld* of family life and personal needs and the *system* world of institutions and their administrative needs. The approach taken by Pearson, Leeper, Burkart and Holmström was to assume the ethical superiority of rationality, understanding and consensus. They were also concerned with designing out dissensus and persuasive rhetoric from the norms of public relations practice.

One of the most valuable applications of Habermas has been Meisenbach's (2006) attempt to apply discourse ethics as a moral framework for organisational communications. Meisenbach is notable for attempting to provide a practical template for applying Habermas to public relations practice. It is worthy of further consideration, but to do so we first need to establish Mouffe's agonistic critique of Habermas. Mouffe is frequently cited and her work used to deconstruct Habermas (Karppinen et al., 2008; Thomassen 2013). However, caution is required as there is often an exaggeration of the differences between them. Nonetheless Mouffe's radical democratic writing also provides a framework for dissecting the problems in the dialogic turn in public relations theory.

A key starting point is Mouffe's contention that Habermas' work is built upon fundamentally flawed assumptions. In contrast to Habermas, agonism assumes that universal rational consensus are a conceptual impossibility. Mouffe insists on the abandonment of all hope of finding democracies that exist beyond social division and hegemonic power, with every order predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities. Orders are neither natural nor objective, but the results of hegemonic practices with democracy understood as a struggle between opposing projects presenting their views of the common good (Mouffe 2005, 2013). Political questions are not merely technical issues to be solved by experts and always involve choices between conflicting alternatives. Mouffe is critical of liberalism's inability to fully envisage the social conflicts that pluralism entails. This necessitates a questioning of the assumptions made when the espousal of ethical public relations is equated with the seeking of consensus and the smothering of difference:

...pluralism is not merely a fact, something that we must bear grudgingly or try to reduce, but an axiological principle. It is taken to be constitutive at the conceptual level of the very nature of modern democracy and considered as something that we should embrace and enhance. This is why the type of pluralism that I am advocating gives a positive status to differences and questions the objective of unanimity and homogeneity (Mouffe: 2000: 19)

Mouffe constructs a distinction between *the political* and *politics*. Mouffe defines *the political* as 'the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies' while *politics* is 'the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created' (2005:9). She contends that the antagonism inherent in *the political* is often ignored by dialogic and deliberative models of *politics*. This explains why Mouffe has stated that it is wrong to ask if we can seek consensus without exclusion, as this would require that *us* can be constructed without *them*. Mouffe uses Derrida's concept of the *constitutive outside*, whereby the creation of individual or group identities always implies the establishment of difference. These differences may not necessarily be antagonistic, but

there always remains the possibility that *us/them* relationships can be converted into a friend/enemy relationship (Mouffe 1993). So, Mouffe suggests the real challenge is how to construct *us/them* in a way that is compatible with pluralism. Others must not be seen as enemies to be destroyed, but adversaries whose ideas must be fought. Not antagonism which is a struggle between enemies, but agonism which is struggle between adversaries. The communicative dimensions to this agonistic assumption are drawn out by Tully (2008). Tully agrees with Mouffe that agreements are always to some extent non-consensual, as disagreement will always remain this means participation can be considered as a strategic-communicative game. But, 'what shapes and holds individuals together as 'citizens' and 'peoples' is not this or that agreement but the free agonistic activities of participation themselves.' (Tully 2008:146). To apply this point to public relations, this means that forms of practice that serve democracy are not centred on compromise or consensus, but on the facilitation or co-operation with the mobilisation of participative spaces and actions. Where consensus is required is on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality, but this will be a conflictual consensus as there will be tensions in regard to their interpretation (Mouffe 2005).

In contrast to the manner in which Habermas' work has been applied to public relations, it is not detached rationality upon which we build models for supporting democracy. Instead we need to consider the possibility that it is the passionate attachment to collective identifications that motivates participation. People must care about an issue and they must also have some hope that at least some progress might be achieved if they participate (Mihai 2014).

The critique of Habermas provided by Mouffe in many ways echo in the reflective discussion provided within Meisenbach's (2006) attempt to apply Habermas' discourse ethics to public relations. Meisenbach developed a five step procedure for communicators to enact a discourse ethic in order to apply the assumption that dialogue is required for organisations to understand if their *valid norms* can be universally applied. When discussing the final stage of this process that follows after all parties discursively debate the consequences of an initial utterance or potential norm, a judgement is made about the validity and acceptability of these statements. Meisenbach shares the uncertainty from Habermas on how disagreements over validity can be resolved, aside from the implication that if all information is shared by all participants it is likely that rational interlocutors will converge in their conclusions. While the problem with this assumption is appreciated, Meisenbach still argues the value of discourse ethics as a process of improving mutual understanding and identifying unreconciled differences. A process that generates improved degrees of mutual understanding is assumed to hold intrinsic value, but raises ethical problems of practitioners engaging marginalised publics in a dialogue under the false pretence that a non-hegemonic consensus will result from the process. As Mouffe (2005) argues it does not matter how rational the discourse, or how ethically correct the procedures, a moment of decision must arrive, and at precisely that moment an ongoing or new hegemonic arrangement will be put in place.

Meisenbach also recognises the problem that it is the organisation itself which is deciding who might be affected by its behaviours or values, with the inevitable influence on the process of imperfect knowledge and subjective bias. This problem alone calls into question any claims to universal inclusivity of the dialogue, not least because better resourced groups are the most likely to be taking action in defence of their vested interests. This problem is identified in empirical studies on public deliberation by researchers who largely apply agonistic assumptions. Stratford et al., (2003) after detailed evaluation of public consultations on environmental issues in Tasmania concluded there was a particular problem in achieving ideal speech situations which may produce socially unjust outcomes. This problem was echoed in Karppinen et al's (2008) study of local government dialogue initiatives in Helsingborg, where they observed that citizens' complaints that did not come within the organiser's definition of future-oriented rationality were frozen out and exclusionary practices were

present. Again in the local government sector Williams (2004) was able to identify five methods that dialogue facilitators with pre-conceived project objectives were able to use to marginalise contributions from citizens who sought to articulate alternative agendas. Meisenbach's defence of the more modest potential of discourse ethics for public dialogue initiatives, mutual understanding and identification of unreconciled differences, could equally be achieved through the creation of agonistic public spaces, but without the ethical peril of forcing practitioners to adhere to, and enforce, objectives and conditions of participation in the dialogue that are not realistically achievable.

This section has already stated the need for some caution when exploring the differences between Habermas and Mouffe. This is because it has often been the case that it has not been Habermas himself, but rather scholars who have drawn upon Habermas and the concept of the public sphere who have over emphasised rationality and consensus (Karppinen 2007). Indeed, this is the evaluation of this paper, that Habermas' work has been applied to public relations without sufficient regard for the contingent tensions in every consensus or the underlying hegemonic power relations that shape the construction of dialogic encounters. There appears to be potential for exploring the possibility of synthesising certain elements of the deliberative and agonistic frameworks. Dahlberg (2013) has argued that the most significant disagreement between Habermas and agonistic scholars is how to theorise exclusion from the deliberative public sphere. While agonists advance the importance of addressing the tension between democracies' functional need for areas of consensus while incorporating dissent and allocating value to any initiatives that widen social access to public debate (Karppinen 2007), Habermasian-influenced research has moved toward embracing the role of spaces for counterpublics that can nurture excluded voices (Dahlberg 2013). It is notable that Brady's (2004) paper that seeks to defend deliberative models against agonistic critiques, while generally endorsing the value of an interaction between the two theories, identifies the use of strategic communication to secure acclaim through exploiting demobilised citizens as a significant problem.

The work of Habermas, despite the potential flaws and dangers when translating into normative public relations theory, is arguably more theoretically rigorous and plausible than the weaker strategic advocacy of dialogue contained within the concept of two way symmetrical communication. However, symmetry has been widely adopted in public relations theory and teaching, and as such is an important constituent part of the dialogic turn in public relations, which necessitates an examination which takes place in the next section.

An Agonistic Critique of Two-way Symmetrical Communication

(To be inserted as a footnote ** J.Grunig and his colleagues developed their work over a number of years and across a number of publications. This section largely draws on Grunig et.al 2002 because it is a comprehensive and definitive statement of Excellence theory that was meant to "finish 17 years of work together" 2002: xii)

This section moves the focus to the other major dialogic theory that has influenced public relations research and teaching. A model which its proponents have claimed provides a paradigm, generalizable across cultures, of ethical non-propagandistic communications practice. While Excellence theory and its advocacy of two way symmetrical communication as the apex of ethical public relations practice is highly familiar to scholars and students in the field, as Mckie and Munshi have established (2007), it is a paradigm that has failed to generate recognition and citations in other academic fields. Therefore for readers who are not already immersed in academic public relations texts, its key tenets need some explanation. The initial concept of symmetry can be found in Grunig and Hunt's 1984 text book, after publication it quickly rose to enjoy a period where it could be considered the dominant paradigm in public relations scholarship.

In a disputable act of historiography Grunig and Hunt (1984) constructed four models of public relations, starting with the least and culminating in the most ethical forms of practice. Early forms of public relations practice were categorised as one-way forms of communication such as publicity/press agency where practitioners sought attention for their organisation through any means with little regard to truth and accuracy, and so in turn is associated with propaganda. The other one-way model was titled public information, where practitioners consciously strove to disseminate accurate information about their organisation, although often with a selection bias towards positive affirmations. The third model, two-way asymmetrical, was the application of scientific persuasion, where organisations would research audiences so as to better understand how to improve the efficacy of their public relations in order to affect attitudinal or behavioural change (Grunig et.al 2002). However in the two-way symmetrical model 'practitioners use research and dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviors of both the organisation and its publics' (Grunig et al., 2002: 38). In operationalising this model practitioners are encouraged to equate ethical communications with a planning process that posits dialogue as a vehicle for seeking and enacting cooperation that in turn leads to the achievement of consensus and harmony between the organisation and its environment (Lane 2014). Over time the meaning of symmetry in public relations scholarship has settled around a process of seeking consensus, indeed 'discussion so far has demonstrated that the ideas and practices of dialogue in the field of public relations have been mediated primarily through discussion about symmetrical communication' (Pieczka 2015:83).

It is important to note that the Excellence project from the outset was oriented to the needs of management elites. Its original research questions addressed the role of communication in achieving organisational objectives and the characteristics of public relations that would increase the likelihood of organisations achieving their goals. The worth of effective public relations was not to be evaluated by any indicator of civic engagement or citizen empowerment, but rather by improving communicative relationships in order to advance principal *bottom line* economic metrics. Two-way symmetrical communication was endorsed on the basis that it was a strategy that would enable organisations to identify and neutralise factors in their external environment which restricted their ability to pursue their goals. When successfully implemented this was valorised as reducing the costs of litigation, regulation and legislation (Grunig et al., 2002: 136). Economic gains for organisations were the primary objective, but Excellence theory argues that inseparable from these gains are improved levels of organisational social responsibility as only high quality relationships with active groups of citizens make symmetry a possibility.

Before applying an agonistic critique of symmetry, we should note that Habermasians would consider symmetry as unethical communication because the founding motivation is not a desire to form a mutual understanding with the *lifeworld*, or to yield to the force of better arguments, but instead to advance strategic interests. Habermasian communicative rationality is a deeper, much more difficult form of dialogue to enact than the dialogue represented by Excellence theory. Two-way symmetry can be achieved without solving any policy problem, or the improvement of any social conditions, although these outcomes are not precluded. Instead it can be achieved through a shallow dialogue that offers concessions by organisations, purely in the expectation that they will reduce levels of critical civic activism that impede the realisation of management goals. Furthermore, Excellence theory explicitly recommends that engagement should take place with 'strategic constituencies', defined as publics who hold the power to constrain an organisation in its ability to achieve its goals, mediating the possibility of conflicts occurring between management and its strategic publics (Grunig et.al 2002). This is another profound divergence in starting points between Habermas' discourse ethics and Excellence. Rather than entering dialogue as notional rational equals, symmetry prioritises the contributions of particular publics if they are believed to

hold the potential ability to restrict the organisation's freedom to pursue its goals. In the previous section we noted the agonistic critique of Habermas frequently centres on arguing the impossibility of any rational, and fully inclusive, consensus that exists beyond hegemony. Excellence theory itself also distances itself from being attached to Habermas' ideal speech situations or Pearson's (1989) attempt to link symmetry to Habermas (Grunig et.al 2002). Symmetry was also adjusted to incorporate elements of game theory, a *mixed-motive* model accepted that organisations will try to achieve their original objectives, while simultaneously trying to help the public satisfy theirs. Symmetry was now emphasised as rejecting *pure cooperation* in favour of reconciling the interests of each party (Grunig et al., 2002: 309). However, the mixed-motive model of symmetry far from satisfying an agonistic critique raises new, potentially more concerning, problems in developing paradigms for understanding how public relations can serve democratic societies.

Mouffe's critique of rational consensus equally applies to Excellence theory. Grunig et al contend (2002: 11) that 'to be symmetrical means that organizations have the worldview that public relations practitioners serve the interests of both sides of relationships'. For agonists, this is a naïve omission of how power and hegemony constitute social relationships. It does not matter how the procedures of the dialogue are arranged, or how ethically correct they might be considered, there will be a moment of decision that will put into place a hegemonic arrangement (Mouffe 2005). At that moment of decision it is not possible to satisfy all publics, identities or claims to recognition. Symmetry does not incorporate the levels of natural antagonism present in *the political*. Therefore when considering communication and democracy, agonists argue that any form of consensus is seen as a hegemonic articulation and that there will always be an *outside* that blocks any full realisation (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

The implication that organisations can equally serve managerial and civic needs has arguably meant that scholars and educators who have enthusiastically adopted this paradigm have, as part of this process, internalised an assumption that it must be in some way unethical to communicate in support of the dominant side in any hegemonic order. This has often rendered invisible the productive aspects of hegemony, *politics* needs hegemonic settlements in order to develop coherent administrations. Without hegemony there would be no order or shared understandings. The task for public relations theory is to develop the tools for scholars and practitioners alike to be better able to evaluate the democratic implications of any given hegemonic order. As Mouffe suggests, 'power is constitutive of the social; there is no social without power relations. Now, any form of order is a hegemonic order...a democratic society in which there is accountability is a form of order and it is a better form of order than an authoritarian regime' (Mouffe quoted in Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006: 4). To scope the distinction between the forms of hegemony that support democratic practice and the forms that damage radical democratic projects Mouffe draws on Gramsci. In this interpretation public relations can support democracy by nurturing *expansive* hegemonies which consciously link and build alliances between publics, particularly those who may struggle socially or economically, and to mobilise these *chains* into democratic directions. In contrast, public relations will ill-serve democracy if it acts to support hegemony by *neutralization*, in which organisations take account 'of the demand of some group, not to transform society so as to resolve the antagonism it expresses, but only so as to impede the extension of that demand' (Mouffe cited in Harper 1994: 99). Symmetry includes in its measures of success the degree to which organisations have achieved autonomy from their strategic publics, indeed complete autonomy is noted as an idealised goal. So within this paradigm when an organisation stimulates activism it will be in order to 'mobilise publics that support their goals and thus increase their autonomy' (Grunig et.al 2002:10). This is uncomfortably close to representing a strategy for hegemony by neutralization, particularly if deployed by already powerful organisations, and certainly runs counter to the agonistic ethos.

Grunig et al (2002) decided to anonymise the many examples and case studies that they cite as examples of Excellence. One notable case study that appears in the index on 44 different pages was a 'chemical association' that 'scored at the very top of the Excellence scale' (2002:458). However, one reference to this case study (2002: 137) provided a link to an article in the trade journal *Chemical Week* (Begley 1993), which once consulted reveals that the association that was endorsed so strongly by Grunig et al was the Chemical Manufacturers Association (CMA), which changed its name to the American Chemistry Council in 2000. Grunig et al cite the CMA's use of citizen advisory panels as one key feature of their symmetrical communications. This allows some critical scrutiny for the claims that the CMA was a compelling example of a balancing of the interests of the public with those of the chemical manufacturing companies. As Grunig et al (2002) acknowledged this was an industry with what was then a reputational challenge presented by the public memory of the Bhopal disaster. Public concern also centred on the CMA's lobbying in this period against the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change (Center for Responsive Politics 2000), and they were documented by Beder (1998) as engaging in the faking of grass roots support for their positions. The citizen panels that were strongly endorsed were part of a voluntary industry code of conduct titled *Responsible Care*. As part of the public relations programme, citizen advisory panels attached to over 300 chemical plants were established as a vehicle for dialogue between company representatives and local communities.

Studies that have examined the conduct and results of *Responsible Care* suggest this public relations programme contravened the ethos and aims of both deliberative and agonistic forms of engagement. Givel's (2007) analysis of CMA documents to examine the goals and objectives of *Responsible Care* noted the publicly stated motivations were to meet the needs of activist and community stakeholders. However, the study concluded that, in fact, the primary goal of the communications were to reduce public concerns in regard to the industry's environmental and public health practices, helping the CMA oppose new environmental legislation. In terms of the citizen advisory panels themselves, Lynn et al (2000) surveyed members of the panels. The results of their study led them to conclude that the panels were 'not perceived by members as successful in serving as systematic links back to the community or in influencing a plant's environmental operations' (2000: 1886). When asked what members believed were the main goals of the panels, making improvements either to the environment or economic relationships scored the lowest level of agreement, while helping companies understand community concerns and improving their communications scored the highest. Prakash's (2000) review of *Responsible Care* noted the continuing low levels of trust of publics living close to chemical facilities, but also argued that citizen groups saw the wider significance of the strategy as seeking substitution of environmental regulations for voluntary codes. Such codes would place the industry into private regimes beyond public scrutiny, in the process reducing the possibility that adversarial relationships could shift to legal or legislative arenas – in line with the aims of Excellence theory reducing economic costs to the industry.

The CMA was an organisation that was identified as actively engaged in attempts to block the implementation of global agreements to tackle climate change and yet the presence of some symmetrical communications initiatives could be pronounced as being at the 'very top' of the Excellence scale that purportedly satisfy both the interests of active publics and the organisation. For debates in public relations theory this suggests the need for new critical examinations of the methodology and claims of the Excellence project, with a particular focus on exploring the communicative behaviours of organisations that Grunig et.al (2002) endorsed as being the most ethical.

While symmetry has been developed and articulated as sitting within dialogic communication, its systems theory roots ground it in a desire for organisations to exercise control of their environments

and seek self-regulation of their processes. This conflicts with the requirements of deep dialogue that necessitates acceptance of unpredictability and a relinquishing of control over the final outcome (Theunissen and Wan Noordin 2012). The use of communication to maintain organisational autonomy suggest Roper's (2005) categorisation of symmetry as a strategy for hegemony remains valid. Large corporate entities use symmetrical communications, including concessionary changes to certain processes or policies, in order to maintain their longer-term hegemonic positions. Roper usefully emphasises the need to analyse these strategies at multiple levels. Organisations can attempt to manage and pacify relationships with civil society in order to maintain stable relationships on other forums with more powerful blocs in society. In this way we can understand the CMA maintained citizen advisory panels as a part of wider reputation management strategies that sought ultimately to strengthen their lobbying. In this sense, it is not surprising that some activist groups have refused to engage in dialogue with such industry associations because they fear they will be participating in bids to preserve the status quo (Zorn et al., 2006)

Ultimately, the agonistic critique that posits the impossibility of universal consensus does not apply to symmetry, but in many ways symmetry represents a grosser violation of agonistic principles. Indeed, they are almost diametrically opposed in terms of how to evaluate what constitutes successful public spaces. Agonism encourages a proactive search for ways to enliven public spaces and encourage wider participation, but symmetry recommends organisations scan public opinion environments to identify potential *hot* issues, and implement strategies to stop these gaining momentum. Agonism seeks ways in which hegemonic relationships can be transparent and contestable, but symmetry seeks to neutralise and isolate civic challenges to existing power relationships.

Discussion

As detailed in the introduction, the democratic significance of the continuing growth of public relations in media discourses is typically expressed through a perception of a shift in the balance of mediatory power between journalists and public relations practitioners. This is relevant, but when considering the inter-relationship between public relations, dialogic spaces and politics the global trend of dispersed governance may be even more significant. As Tully (2008) documents modern governments have increasingly dispersed state powers into outsourced agencies, indeed this is another structural factor that explains the growth in public relations employment as these agencies invest in communication management, but he argues that publics are not as apathetic as some have thought and have continued to demand democratic participation, expecting to be engaged as *citizens* rather than just as *consumers* who hold *relationships* with *brands*. Agonists such as Tully see a danger in the belief that agencies dealing with issues of everyday life should be put beyond politics, indeed the case study exploration of the CMA in the previous section presented an illustration of how the adoption of symmetrical dialogue, to contentious issues such as energy production, resulted in exactly this scenario. The game of freedom and participation should not be restricted to formal democratic institutions, and as with this paper, the implication is to understand how public relations can assist in creating public spaces that enable mobilisation of civic passions whenever and wherever they might wish to challenge non-democratic forms of governance – rather than investing in systems of early detection and communication strategies to neutralise, or in practice parlance, *kill* issues.

This paper has drawn on the sharp contrast in ethos of agonism to that of deliberative or symmetrical models of public relations. Agonism holds more potential for conceptualising forms of public relations that support democracy. Habermas' concept of the public sphere problematizes the

use of public relations by groups to compete against each other as well as public relations' influence on media systems. But if universal consensus is rejected as a conceptual impossibility then agonistic contests that deploy public relations campaigns can be seen as holding democratic legitimacy. Indeed, this opens up the potential to build theories of agonistic public relations that could harmonise with critical theorising. As Ramsey suggests: 'It could be argued that the agonistic approach allows us to conceive of ways in which public relations might be harnessed to further the ends of the agonistic approach, rather than being seen as something intrinsically inimical to the establishment of a critical theory' (Ramsey 2015: 73). Hegemonic orders are required for the enactment of democratic will, but this paper argues the utility of Mouffe's differentiation between hegemony by neutralization and expansive hegemonies. The former would ask public relations, particularly public relations in service of powerful interests, to seek out tactical settlements to de-energize issue publics, whereas the latter would urge public relations to stimulate engagement and empower publics by bridging multiple publics and issues. An application of the agonistic ethos to public relations would elevate contest above neutral deliberation, instil a regard for opponents, an even stronger regard for disadvantaged publics who lack communication resources, an abhorrence of permanent winners and openness to new issues and challenges. It would also entail a fostering of public spaces that welcome emotional, passionate engagement, a commitment to make power transparent and an end to the illusory assumption that policy issues are somehow neutral or technical matters awaiting communicative solutions, but are always choices between conflicting alternatives.

However, there remains a potential for further research that might seek to find pathways of convergence between Habermas' work and agonistic models. Both deliberative and agonistic models agree on the importance of deepening and widening public participation, both are oriented towards reforming public sphere/public spaces in order to improve social conditions, both place communication as vital but also subservient to democracy. However, the weaker form of dialogue posited by Excellence theory directly violates various dimensions of the agonistic ethos, not least in the way it can be conceived as representing a strategy template for hegemony by neutralization. Opportunities for areas of convergence between Excellence and agonism appear less likely. The two models are mutually inaccessible to the other. The starting points for Excellence are articulated using a lexicon of business economics that sees democratic contest and mobilised publics as a negative monetary *cost*, making it able to suggest idealised scenarios that would involve organisations successfully seeking autonomy from enactments of democratic will or control. Furthermore, the motivation of symmetry is to prevent the conditions emerging which would allow counter-hegemonic projects to flourish, indeed Grunig et.al (2002) are clear that if the public's interests became dominant in a relationship with an organisation this would violate the principles of symmetry.

To conclude this discussion Bäcklund and Mäntysalo's (2011) matching of democratic theory to planning theory can be amended to be made relevant for public relations theory (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Democracy Theory/Models of Public Relations

Elite	Aggregative	Deliberative	Agonistic
e.g. Bernays, propaganda	e.g. Excellence Theory/two-way symmetrical communication	e.g. Habermas, discourse ethics	e.g. Mouffe, radical pluralism

Publics as subjects of expert/elite groups	Publics are organised and to be engaged in bargaining and compromise	Publics are rational actors, rules-based dialogue to maximise their inputs into a search for universal consensus	Publics hold conflicting identities and interests, spaces created to ensure antagonisms are converted into agonism, only partial consensuses are achievable
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The propaganda model of public relations can be characterised as *elites*, who consider themselves to hold higher levels of knowledge and wisdom than the general public, using communication to manipulate public attitudes and behaviours in the direction they believe to represent the greater good. Ethics become a secondary consideration in relation to the achievement of the desired objectives. Globally, it is beyond doubt that this model is still widely practised, but it is not endorsed as legitimate in either modern public relations or political theory. The *aggregative* model can be equated to Excellence theory. In this model multiple publics and organisations initiate dialogue in order to advocate for their self-interest. The win-win compromise central to two-way symmetry can be viewed as an aggregation of the distributed power between organisations and publics. In these interactions organisations realise the limits of their legitimacy and autonomy. The exhortation to compromise in Excellence ostensibly assures some kind of satisfaction of mutual needs, but Excellence theory also includes the proviso that the process of aggregation should not proceed so far as to threaten the longer-term interests of managerial elites. It is an advancement on the propaganda model, but if privileging democratic concerns it is a weak and flawed model when compared to the frameworks offered by either the deliberative or agonistic models. *Deliberative* models of public relations require deeper forms of dialogue. The focus of this model is on inclusiveness and rationality. When drawing upon Habermas it requires both organisations and publics to pool their self-interests into a wider process of seeking settlements that enjoy the widest possible levels of agreement. The legitimacy of the consensus will emerge from the ethical correctness of the dialogue and the ability for all participants to contribute their knowledge and concerns. Through its founding concerns for the quality of public debates and the realisation of socially progressive outcomes, its application to public relations enables the development of a civically grounded sense of ethics and duty, but it is a model that is built upon assumptions that agonists would consider to be flawed and inoperable in real world contexts. The *agonistic* model by providing a robust critique of deliberative dialogue also in turn provides opportunities to address these problems and build new paradigms of democratic public relations grounded in synthesising the two models. Dialogues can only ever achieve partial conflictual consensus, within this paradigm the normative role for public relations becomes one where it acts as an agent that mobilises and enables active publics. It demands transparency of power relations and a disposition that accepts interventions in the communicative economy that empower socially disadvantaged publics.

The concept of public relations practitioners as boundary spanners - the manner in which practitioners both represent the interests of the organisation to its publics, but in this process also embed themselves in the interests of those publics and begin to articulate these back to the organisation – remains relevant when considering how to develop agonistic models. There is a particular significance of Holtzhausen's (2000) postmodern reimagining of the concept if dissensus is seen as the engine which drives practitioners to recognise and respect social and cultural differences. Although initially primarily associated with J.Grunig's aggregative model of public relations, boundary spanning requires further examination to determine its agonistic utilities. There

must be some necessary caution in regard to boundary spanning practitioners who start to see themselves as self-appointed proxy advocates for marginalised groups. More profound impacts are likely to be found through the building of networks and alliances that mobilise *chains* and empower marginalised groups to advocate for their own interests. Because the model of contemporary agonism used in this paper is not anti-foundational it may present a more promising framework for public relations advocacy than the rejection of human progress, or the associated aversion for campaigners who seek to reform social institutions, that comes with Lyotardian postmodernism. At worst this form of postmodernism can do nothing to challenge 'injustice and oppression since it offers no argument, no critical resources or validating grounds for perceiving them as unjust and oppressive' (Norris 1993:287). However a postmodern post-foundational disposition in public relations theory provides the basis of what might be termed a reflective realism for practitioners, reminding them that the criteria upon which their campaigns are built are always contestable and contingent (Holtzhausen 2012; Moloney and Mckie 2015).

Developing agonistic models of public relations and seeking synergies with existing paradigms, particularly deliberative forms of public relations will, as with all other normative modelling, inevitably run into practical problems when translating into practice. Pieczka's (2006) sceptical interrogation of symmetry – why would any powerful organisation adopt this strategy – would equally apply to an agonistic model. Agonism certainly presents a theoretical underpinning to strategies that could be pursued by counter-hegemonic organisations and movements, and there have been significant recent examples in the Spanish speaking world, such the communicative strategies of recent governments in Argentina or the forms of public engagement adopted by the *Podemos* movement in Spain (*La Nación* 2012; Retamozo 2014; Tremlett 2015). It also provides potential as a model for public relations departments who have a mission to mobilise and empower socially disadvantaged groups, as well as for practitioners who are frequently charged with organising public consultations or seeking to encourage civic participation. It offers an innovative alternative for corporate communicators who may wish to find ways of enacting a more progressive ethos, if that is important to the organisation and its brand. For communicators working for corporations with a history of hegemonic strategies by neutralization, agonism presents a challenge to their existing ethos and values, but it is one that needs to be presented. It would also help them to understand and reflect on why many publics remain distrustful of and reluctant to participate in corporate responsibility programmes. Finally, as organisations are increasingly recognised as producers of media content, as Lunt and Livingstone (2013) argue there is an idealised prospective service to the public sphere, which would be realised through mobilising participation in the production of deliberative news or social media content with the explicit aim of articulating public concerns into intelligible formats to those who administer *politics*.

In the agonistic spirit, this paper has sought to seek out and reveal areas for dissensus and scholarly conflict when considering what should be public relations' role in supporting democracy. Consistent with the ethos of modern agonism, it does so with a particular regard for understanding how public relations can interrupt power relations in a manner which is biased towards the needs of the socially disadvantaged. The arguments contained within this paper, and their implications if developed further, are not value neutral.

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