

**How can the study of persuasion help us to better understand public relations practice?
Your answer should include the analysis of real examples**

Persuasion

Persuasion has played an integral part in public relations practice throughout its relatively short life. Bernays (1928) defines the purpose of public relations as “interpretation” and “bringing ideas to the consciousness of the public”. He later concedes that such propaganda is “methods used to persuade [the public] to accept a given idea or commodity”. Such thinking establishes what Grunig and Hunt (1984) call the “the persuasion model that has dominated thinking about public relations since its birth”.

They define persuasion as “communicating only those characteristics of an organisation that the public will accept”; transforming the application of persuasion and its function within public relations becomes a key concept in their theoretical ideas, as we will return to later. L’Etang (2008) suggests persuasion is “the intention to achieve a particular response” and Heath (2001) equates “scientific persuasion” with rhetoric, claiming “rhetoric is the art of persuasion”.

Despite the barely-disguised presence of persuasion as a purpose of public relations, Tench and Yeomans (2006) note that “the idea of persuasion has been left out of academic definitions, despite recognition of its importance in the profession’s history”. Academics have sought to define rhetoric (Heath, in Heath 2001 & Marsh, 2006), propaganda (L’Etang 2008 & Centre for Media and Democracy) and readily talk about “influence” but the admission, which Bernays seemed to have less reticence in making, that persuasion is part of the practice of public relations, is harder to discern.

Courtright and Smuddle (2009) say “We believe that the focus on persuasion is limited and over-privileged” when talking about the purposes of public relations and Tench and Yeomans (2006) sum up:

“early PR theorists had no problem with acknowledging the centrality of persuasion to PR...However, more recent PR theory has tended to move away from this aspect of communication and concentrate on more acceptable images of negotiation and adaption.”

Although Bernays’s writing seems to see a direct relationship between propaganda and persuasion, modern authors have sought to draw a distinction. Jowett and O’Donnell (1986) say:

“Propaganda is a form of communication that is different from persuasion because it attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. Persuasion is interactive and attempts to satisfy the needs of both persuader and persuadee.”

It could be said that persuasion as an art form within PR practise has been outlawed and then rehabilitated once a place within Grunig’s model is found for it. This mirrors the PR

profession as a whole seeking a new identity and purpose to reform what it considers the unacceptable role and facets of early PR practitioners.

It is easy to see why a public relations profession keen to seek greater acceptance within corporate and governmental environments would wish to move away from a purpose and practice synonymous to some people with manipulation. But whether or not we place it within a more symmetrical theory of public relations or the more democratic process of “negotiation and adaption”, persuasion it remains

I believe that recognising that what Hearit (1994) calls “the persuasive exchange” has always been and continues to be a legitimate purpose of public relations practice is important for PR theorists and professionals alike. Persuasion, as Heath, Courtright and Smuddle and Marsh all elucidate, is a function whose political and social power has been recognised since ancient times. Only by acknowledging its presence can we hope to take a critical look at how to engage it ethically and professionally between the organisations and publics with whom we are involved.

Studying persuasion

Grunig’s study of persuasion is based largely around defining a place for it in his theories of how a new, democratic public relations practice should look. Having decried the “persuasion model” (Grunig, 1984) that he believed was central to an outdated form of practice, he nevertheless finds a place for it within his two-way symmetrical theory.

This two-way model argues for organisations to have dialogue with their publics, although this pertinently does not exclude persuasion. Rather *“If persuasion occurs, the public should be just as likely to persuade the organisation’s management to change attitudes or behaviour.”* Similarly in Grunig (2009), he says:

“Life for both people and organisations, therefore, is a constant process of negotiation and collaboration. And communication is one of the most effective means we have of negotiation and collaboration.”p12

It is very noticeable that during Grunig’s 2009 assessment, he also talks about “communication”, “compromise” but steers clear of the term “persuasion” in a way that he did not in the earlier work. Perhaps he has come to believe that persuasion is something different from these terms — that compromise, collaboration and communication are possible without persuasion.

They may be possible without formal rhetoric but persuasion is more than words; it is an attitude and stance and concerns what is not discussed and communicated as well as what is. One may ask why if Grunig is satisfied that he is able to accommodate persuasion in his 1984 model, it has been banished from later study; and to consider whether this is indicative of a further shift on the part of public relations practice away from acknowledging persuasion as a purpose of the profession.

So examining Grunig's theoretic study of persuasion could serve to re-enforce the notion that public relations has abandoned all association with persuasion, propaganda and rhetoric. But it seems unlikely — governmental and corporate organisations would not pay lawyers if they did not believe it afforded them advantage in court; and they would not employ public relations professionals if they did not believe that it lent them an edge in the court of public opinion.

Jowett and O'Donnell (1992) describe in more depth the history of persuasion. They note that following the First World War, much research was carried out on persuasion and "specifically the study of attitudes". Twenty-five years later, they say the Second World War "caused intense concern about the persuasive powers of the mass media and their potential for directly altering attitudes and behaviour."

They note that following the war, a series of studies was carried out into persuasion and its effects, including those of Kelman and Hovland (1953), which proposed the "dissociation hypothesis" and McGuire (1968), who developed a process-orientated model for persuasion that follows on from Hovland's own work. His theory suggested five stages to persuasion — attention, comprehension, yielding, retention and action.

Although they have been modified and added to by subsequent authors, this model does reconcile with Heath (2001), who puts forward his "Rhetorical Enactment Rationale" with three key stages; epistemological (fact-based), axiological (evaluative) and ontological (behavioural). We can see that the fact-based stage is one where organisation will try to obtain its publics' attention, usually by presenting the information in the most credible fashion possible (although Kelman and Hovland suggest that this association wanes over time). In the second instance, publics seek to comprehend these facts of messages in an axiological stance. And depending on the nature of the publics, the facts or how they have been communicated, in the ontological stage the public can either yield, retain and act upon the information, or choose to ignore it completely.

These studies and this attempt to place persuasion in a process seems indicative of an attempt by the public relations profession to tame the beast in its midst. It understands very well its own origins and is faced with a dichotomy; it needs to move away from being the business of propaganda for the sake of its own credibility and to that end, a series of PR theorists and academics have redefined the profession along the lines of diversity, democracy and dialogue.

But public relations also understands that in the art of persuasion lays its power and its place within the "dominant coalition"; to eject persuasion from the practice of public relations would be an exercise in normative self-immolation. So in order to maintain its ability to affect outcomes while retaining credibility as a profession, modernist and post-modernist critics have provided public relations practice with a series of self-imposed structures and ethical guidelines within which what L'Etang calls "acceptable persuasion" can be practiced.

Weaver, Motion and Roper (2006) find no clearer indication of this than when they cite Jowett and O'Donnell (1992) in differentiating between "propaganda as the self-interested attempt to manipulate the behaviour of others" and "ethical persuasion, which they

conceive of as an ‘interactive or transactive’ process”. It is doubtful whether Bernays would have appreciated such carefully drawn differences and this concept — that persuasion can take on different guises for different purposes — is a powerful indicator as to the changing nature of public relations in a more diverse, democratic and dialogic age.

One example of this was the launch in early 2010 of the Apple iPad. While Apple knows that its principle public is the paying consumer, its initial publics for the launch were technology publications, blogs and leisure sections of national newspapers. If we consider what Heath calls the epistemological, we can see that the product itself browses the web, hosts email and displays documents and custom applications in exactly the same way as many of Apple’s current products, only with a slightly larger screen.

It is, in theory, a product without a market and Apple’s public relations challenge is to create a market by influencing the evaluative and comprehension phase during the product’s launch. A good record exists of some of the things that Apple did on the Guardian’s Technology Blog for 27 January 2010. These include releasing rumour and counter-rumour about the name, appearance, specification and widely tipping off journalists ahead of time that a significant announcement would be made. As part of this “dialogue” with blogs and technology journalists, opinion-formers were flown into California for the keynote speech of chief executive Steve Jobs and given hands-on demonstrations afterwards.

The reaction of Stephen Fry, who attended the event as an enthusiast and not a technology expert, is telling. Writing in *The Guardian* two days later, he started by taking a purely fact-based view:

“I know there will be many who have already taken one look and pronounced it to be nothing but a large iPhone and something of a disappointment.”

That was the reaction of many who were not targeted in Apple’s dialogue with publics. But Fry continues by saying that all the doubts over the product will desist once the product itself is handled and the look and feel of it appreciated. And therein lies the persuasion — it is undeniable that Apple has had an extended and wide-ranging dialogue with its publics over the iPad launch. But the purpose of the dialogue is to highlight the launch and the purpose of the launch is persuasion — to influence the axiological and comprehension phase by ensuring that key publics have access to the look and feel of the product.

In this case, Grunig’s two-way view of how persuasion should take place is being feigned but a one-way asymmetrical model designed to be highly persuasive actually deployed in a competitive and fluid marketplace. It is widely accepted that the two-way model is a normative concept — hence L’Etang’s “acceptable” and “non-acceptable” persuasion. The example of Apple suggests that it is therefore possible within public relations practice to believe that a two-way model is being employed when a one-way model is, or that a one-way model can be made to seem very similar to a two-way model. In each case, persuasion is at the heart of the purpose.

In 2006, the UK government began to use the video-based social media utility YouTube to conduct its public relations. Blogger Steve Rubel noted this in an entry of August 18 and the

two video uploading to the site featured Transformational Government and consolidating departments. On the face of it, YouTube seems an apt medium through which to conduct a two-way communication as each video has a message board attached.

But a Cabinet Office spokesperson at the time said:

“Government needs to keep pace with these changes and ensure we are always looking at new ways to reach people with the things that they need to know. We are open to new ways of communicating; we are watching the digital revolution all the time and developing our own ways in government to communicate.”

Nowhere in the statement is there any mention of feedback or the opportunity for users to enter into any kind of dialogue with the government on the content of the communication. Instead, the fact that the government is seeking to change the nature of communication has become the subject of public relations in itself — the government is seeking to influence people’s perception of it by spelling out the approach that it takes to communications.

The content of the videos remains entirely persuasive, some would say propaganda. In this case, it appears that persuasion and the need to influence the epistemological/axiological or attention/comprehension phases of our attitude-forming has become an obstacle to truly democratic communications. This is an important point to make about persuasion — that it may be so embedded a part of our public relations practice that contrary to Grunig’s concept of mutual persuasion, it is an internal blocker to achieving the two-way communication that he cites as the normative.

Fawkes (2006) draws attention to another area of government public relations, health campaigns. Taking the example of the anti-salt campaigns that suggest not consuming more than six grams of salt per day, these attempt to achieve result through a range of persuasive approaches, including the rhetorical model favoured by Heath — see above about the six grams of salt per day — and the semiotic, whereby a character on television may be trying to “find” the salt in their food by looking behind walls, in drawers and elsewhere around a building.

There is no doubt that these campaigns are persuasive — overtly so. But it could be questioned whether such a blunt message can have the desired effect. When Grunig and Hunt said that “communication, especially through the mass media, rarely has a persuasive effect” we have to remember that they are arguing against the “persuasion model” and consideration of their statement should be made with this in mind.

It does though seem plausible that when a message is too direct, too unsubtle and couched in terms that feel uncomfortably personal, the message is less likely to succeed. So the study of this aspect of persuasion helps us understand why public relations practice must be careful to ensure its persuasive messages are sound, subtle and ingenious enough to be effective and pay particular attention to the receptiveness of their audiences.

The effect of credibility on persuasion also helps us understand public relations practice better. Heath (2001) quotes Aristotle as saying: “Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s

personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think them [or her] credible". Conversely, the research of Hovland, demonstrated that regardless of perceived credibility, people would tend to separate the message from the source only a short time after hearing it. This does not, though, suggest that credibility is unimportant — rather that the window for credible public relations sources to project their message is a small one.

Fawkes (2006) continues: "The issues of credibility...are of direct relevance to PR where it is essential to establish credible sources for messages". The persuasive nature of sources was also understood by Bernays, who described in Bernays (1928) how mass psychology dictated that people would be influenced by credible figures, using the example of doctors promoting the eating of bacon and architects the necessity of a music room to sell pianos. Out-of-time examples they may be but they demonstrate the importance of credibility and help us to understand why establishing credible sources within government, business and the third sector remains an important strategic objective of public relations.

Conclusion

The story of persuasion in public relations is the story of PR itself and the study of persuasion tells us much about the practice of public relations. We understand that the practice has sought to move away from a persuasion-based purpose and key to this shift has been the work of Grunig and Hunt (1984), who sought to reflect both socio-political changes as well as practicalities in dealing with publics in their model of public relations practice. The fact however that even this model needs to accommodate persuasion shows that it remains present in the modernist public relations practice.

Other writers such as L'Etang accept that persuasion is and always has been part of public relations and is something at the heart of the concept of ethical public relations. We understand that in wielding the power of persuasion, the normative concept of public relations that backs up our claim to professional advancement insists that we must be reasonable and conscientious in doing so.

We see that persuasion can be an obstacle for dialogue if it is not controlled properly and messages that are too overtly persuasive can lose credibility for being so. We can understand that credible sources are a major contributor to the ability of an organisation to persuade and must be established and maintained.

Moreover, perhaps we gain an understanding that even though academics may continue to debate the relative merits and position of persuasion, its art remains central to the ability of public relations to establish itself both as a strategically important unit with the systems of an organisation and as a democratic voice for publics engaging in dialogue.

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