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DISSENT and PROTEST PUBLIC RELATIONS

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This blog/open source document is published by the Public Relations Research Group in the Media School, Bournemouth University to develop public relations (PR) thinking. Its topic explores the validity of two new terms that may help academics and practitioners understand past (and present) PR practices and events more completely.

'Dissent PR' and 'protest PR' are apparently new to the disciplinary lexicon. They are offered here as a differentiation on 'activism PR', being arguably more refined than the latter's very wide reach. Secondly they allow the development of new explanatory categories that may deepen our knowledge of PR events. For example, they may more fully describe the development of the long 40 year campaign to abolish slavery in the British Empire, 1789 to 1833 . Finally, there is a possible, more general disciplinary outcome, i.e. the weakening of the common but misleading perception that PR is a politically right-wing method of communication.

To explore these matters, four seminars were held in the Media School, Bournemouth University, during autumn term 2012 to see whether interested colleagues could usefully apply the terms to current, recent and past PR happenings.

The contributors were:

David McQueen, BU lecturer specialising in politics and media, on the topic 'PR wars' between charities and corporate interests;

Pawel Surowiec, BU lecturer specialising in propaganda studies, on information campaigns by the *Solidarity* trade union against the Polish communist government;

Heather Yaxley, PR consultant, BU lecturer and PhD researcher, on some historic cases of women in dissenting and protesting roles.

(**Neil Duncan-Jordan**, national officer of the National Pensioners Convention, gave a seminar on his activist group's two year campaign against public expenditure cuts but campaigning time pressures prevented him writing it up.)

David, Pawel and Heather describe below their findings about the value of the terms to their analyses. They do so after an initial seminar in July first fleshed out the area, and after background conversations with Kevin Moloney.

But first a note on how Kevin Moloney argues that subsumed inside the term 'activist PR' are the sub-categories dissent PR and protest PR.

Dissent PR is the dissemination of ideas, commentaries, and policies through PR techniques in order to change current, dominant thinking and behaviour in discrete economic, political and cultural areas of public life.

UK examples are think tanks (e.g. the free market Adam Smith Institute; the liberal conservative ResPublica and the social democratic Institute for Public Policy Research); religious groups (the Quakers with their support for gay marriage, and the Catholic Church with their opposition to it); and activist/pressure groups (The National Pensioners Convention which challenges intellectually cuts in public sector pensions and runs campaigns against these policies; Migration Watch that challenges, through research, mass immigration to the UK; Karma Nirvana which challenges culturally and practically forced marriages in the South Asian population, and Biomass Watch which warns of the dangers of electricity generation using bio-material). A more historical example is the use by the Fabians, a left wing think tank, in late Victorian Britain of what they called 'permeation', the putting forward of their ideas " . . . in print and public debate which would gradually permeate the thinking of politicians and the main political parties" (Lodge, 2012, p. 58).

An American example of dissent PR's use is from a former member of the American Enterprise Institute quoted in The Guardian (Monbiot, 2012) as saying that think tanks "... increasingly function as public relations agencies" and that in this role they are "... vanguardists, mobilising first to break and then to capture a political system..." There is a British example as well. A Daily Telegraph columnist (Nelson, 2012) wrote of charities and semi-official bodies supporting favoured policy ideas in this way: "If a good idea is implemented without intellectual covering fire then it is doomed no matter how powerful the minister."

Dissent PR is, therefore, about bringing attention to new thinking, new behaviours in areas of national life. It promotes ideas for change and for retention in the political economy and civil society. The term is not defined in a left-wing sense. Rather, it is PR promoting the ideas of public intellectuals, academics, experts, people of faith found in both progressive and conservative philosophical circles. It is PR techniques designed to bring attention to these thinkers and their arguments in order to change the policy climate.

Dissent PR has a related form, Protest PR, and it is a consequence of the dissent term. It is also persuasive communication but not principally about ideas, behaviours and policies. Instead it persuades in order to implement those ideas, behaviours and policies into law, regulation and other forms of executive action. It is, for example, the National Pensioners Convention going

to Parliament with hundreds of its activists and personally lobbying MPs. It is the London Occupy movement setting up tents on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral and deploying media relations to publicise their anti-capitalist argument.

Note that an organisation can do both dissent and protest PR (e.g. Biomass Watch) while others do only one (e.g. The Adam Smith Institute). An historical example of an organisation doing the two contemporaneously is the British suffragette movement in the early 1900s. The trade magazine PR Week described the movement as being “. . . a democratic groundswell of support, being efficiently organised, and, that while making use of PR devices, also resorted to more desperate means such as hunger strike . . .” (1999, p. 10). Another suffragette example is the arson attacks on railway property before 1914, identified by propaganda slogans and pamphlets left at the scenes of attack (Nisbett, 2013).

David McQueen

‘PR War! The battle lines in a PR war between the energy sector and protest groups’.

Can the terms 'dissent PR' or 'protest PR' usefully be applied to the work of political and environmental activists? Campaigns to raise awareness or mobilise resistance against corporate or state activity perceived to be against the public interest can take many forms. However, campaigners are likely to flatly reject the use of the term 'public relations' to describe any of the work they do. Studies of public relations within the critical and radical academic tradition would lend strong support to such a rejection by narrowly defining PR as “corporate propaganda” or “a set of techniques for pursuing corporate interests rather than promoting common interests” (Miller and Dinan, 2008, p. 4-5). Resentment at academic efforts to describe PR as a “persuasive tool for strengthening democracy” is understandable when approaching the debate from this perspective.



By contrast, pluralist definitions of public relations are more inclusive and provide scope for including communications and activities that range from hype, persuasion and reputation management to relationship building and more utopian two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). This looser definition permits those working within that paradigm to speak of 'protest', 'dissent' and 'activist PR' and to view the battle for public opinion over such issues as energy as an kind of 'PR war'.

Examples of such PR war would include the many on-going battles between energy companies and protest groups which stretch from Fukushima in Japan to the Gulf of Mexico and from the Niger Delta in West Africa to the North-West of England. The battle lines for this war were outlined in a paper presented to the PR Research Group by David McQueen.

The presentation explored the communications and organisational action of activist groups whose primary purpose is to influence public attitudes and government policy. It looked at campaign tactics including the use of the internet for site attacks, hacking and the creation of parody sites, often employing sophisticated online humour. It also covered non-violent protests methods used by campaigning groups including lobbying, protest marches, petitions and stunts. Campaigning public relations was shown to be most effective when there was a clear, simple purpose, measurable objectives and the campaigners stayed within the law. Campaigns are thought to have the opportunity to gain legitimacy in this way especially if they make good use of

technology and provide the opportunity for members to meet and share views.

The paper then turned to the fossil fuel and nuclear energy sector's PR battles with activist groups. Reputation management efforts by the oil and gas sectors were reviewed, including BP's public relations failures over the Deepwater Horizon oil spill - which affected thousands of miles of coastline of the Gulf of Mexico - and Greenpeace's successful 'brandjacking' and social networking campaign. Extensive and sustained media coverage of this environmental disaster was compared to the virtually non-existent media reporting of a recent, similar catastrophic oil spill off the coast of Nigeria by a Shell-owned rig. The BBC broadcast coverage of the dangerous crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant following the March 2011 tsunami revealed that nuclear industry experts dominated the commentary. These industry experts played a key crisis management role in minimising the likelihood of reactor



meltdown or nuclear contamination due to leaks from the power plants and reassured a nervous public. The comparative lack of anti-nuclear experts and voices ensured that the nuclear industry maintained effective control of the story despite alarming developments at the site of the accident that included the full meltdown of three of the six reactors (CNN, 2011).

Assuming a broad, pluralist definition of public relations allows for some comparative insights that may be more difficult to establish within the radical academic tradition. One finding is that protest campaign groups tend to focus on producing PR directed at the general public whilst the energy sector directs more efforts and resources into political lobbying. The paper showed how this 'public relations war' has had uneven outcomes with activist groups often winning the battle for public opinion, whilst energy corporations and interests have been more successful in setting the agenda for legislative and policy changes and winning elite opinion. This success has been in part due to corporation's success in mobilising third party endorsement and working together through industry bodies, think tanks, business networks, policy planning groups and front groups – and developing online strategies that complement more traditional lobbying efforts.

Pawel Surowiec

‘Solidarność’: persuasive acts of resistance (1980-1981)

The *Solidarity* (org. ‘Solidarność’) movement, formed in Poland at the beginning of 1980s, had multiple collective identities (Touraine, 1989): it was a trade union; an unprecedented phenomenon in European activism; a movement which stood for civic and national unity, and it represented a struggle for ‘universal’ democratic principles. The construction of *Solidarity*’s powerful identities was facilitated by persuasive communication practices enacted by leaders and activists. Those practices, I argue, bring to life two analytical categories for PR-propaganda studies which have been developed at Bournemouth University: ‘protest PR’ and ‘dissent PR’ (Moloney, 2012).

What makes *Solidarity*’s communication practices fascinating is the context in which they were enacted (L’Etang, 2010). Specifically, the settings of a socialist regime suffering from economic (workers’ conditions) and legitimacy crises (communist ideologies) became an enabling stage for PR-ized socio-economic changes in Poland. *Solidarity* accelerated those changes: their ‘protest PR’ and ‘dissent PR’ captured the imagination of Western and Polish public opinion.

Given the context in which *Solidarity* was established, I argue that the movement’s persuasive communication practices extend the arguments of British PR academics that civic campaigning finds its natural home in democracies and/or market economies (e.g. Moloney, 2009). I extend this argument to the settings of an authoritarian Poland in which transition, among other forces, was mediated by the PR-propaganda messages of social movements. Polish *Solidarity* is the case in point. Ławniczak et al. (2003) state: “there is no doubt that labour unions played a central role in the history of the Polish transition. It was the *Solidarity* trade union that brought down the Socialist and Communist regime” (p. 272). While this statement might have some exploratory value in terms of setting out analytical grounds, empirical evidence of communicative practices by *Solidarity* is required. For that reason, in July of 2012, I embarked on fieldwork. I spend three weeks in the European Centre of *Solidarity** in Gdańsk collecting archive materials and interviewing former *Solidarity* activists involved in persuasive communication (1980-1981). This blog entry is a ‘work in progress’ report on this study.

While comprehensive findings are still to be published, the first overview of the data indicates that ‘protest PR’ and ‘dissent PR’ categories (Moloney 2012) lie in *Solidarity*’s communications archive. The first category is particularly explicit during the strike period (14 - 30 August 1980) in Gdańsk Shipyard and across other Polish northern cities. The second defines reported communicative activities prominent in the post-strike period (30

August 1980 - 13 December 1981) when *Solidarity* attempted to implement a “corporatist version of political economy” (Teague, 1995) and to re-shape the Polish economy in accordance with this model of industrial relations (Duhé and Sriramesh, 2009).

The narratives emerging from the archive drew one’s attention to the complexities and conditions of *Solidarity*’s communicative environment: the totality of the Polish government’s propaganda in 1980s; restricted access to the government-controlled media; limited-PR/media backgrounds of *Solidarity*’s communicators (but attention to an assumed ‘objectivism’ in communication), and the development of the ‘second circulation’ (underground) in publishing since mid-1970s. Olaszek (2012) argues that ‘second circulation’ actors (e.g. The Workers Defence Committee published ‘Głos’; ‘Krytyka’; ‘Robotnik’; ‘Placówka’) became *Solidarity*’s allies in a struggle against the government’s news control. I further argue that this underground publishing and PR-propaganda expanded access to the media.

As often is the case with the analysis of PR-propaganda, one of the ambiguous aspects of *Solidarity*’s persuasive communication is the actual signifier of this practice and the scope of its activities. There was an agreement among the interviewed *Solidarity*’s activists that while ‘propaganda’ was associated with the communist authorities, *Solidarity*’s communicative practices, during the strike period (14 - 30 August 1980) and shortly thereafter, were described as ‘information provision’; ‘press spokespersonship’; ‘media relations’ or as ‘communicative activism’.

While the phrase ‘public relations’ was not explicitly used by my interviewees, the communicative outputs of their practice indicate that they deployed tactics derived from PR-propaganda practice: strike actions; public displays and banners (e.g. ‘21 workers demands’ displayed in the Gdańsk Shipyard); media relations (Lech Wałęsa gave his first media interview to the BBC; Lech Bądkowski was the *Solidarity*’s first press officer as the August strike was covered by app. 200 Western journalists); branding (visual identity designed by Jerzy Janiszewski); proto-lobbying (strike negotiations with the government supported by a group of policy experts); leafleting and production of murals (e.g. stunts by ‘The Poster and Propaganda Group’ headed by Zygmunt Błażek), and production and distribution of samizdat (e.g. ‘Strajkowy Biuletyn Informacyjny’).

One of the first strategic objectives of *Solidarity* was to gain a greater access to the media and to make sure that its voice was heard not only in the Western media (as well as by Western labour unions, politicians, and celebrities supporting their efforts), but also in the local, government-controlled media. My study uncovers *Solidarity*’s communicative practices and persuasive acts of resistance against the Sovietised domination in a

dramatic struggle for a more balanced economy, freedom of speech, and basic human rights.

As far as the terms 'protest PR' and 'dissent PR' are concerned, they are proving to be useful in offering conceptual categories in which to place *Solidarity's* persuasive communication, localized communication strategies and tactics used by *Solidarity's* activists. Most importantly, they link together changes in 1980s Poland by *Solidarity's* activists whose communicative struggle heroically challenged the Communist domination and also re-shaped public policy in a state until then dominated by Soviet influence.

Finally, the author notes that The European Center of *Solidarity's* mission statement says that it is "a multifunctional institution combining scientific, cultural and educational activity with a modern museum and archive, documenting freedom movements in the modern history of Poland and Europe". He acknowledges the help of Anna Maria Mydlarska, Grażyna Goszczyńska, Monika Krzencessa-Ropiak and Piotr Kolas with the data collection for this study.

Heather Yaxley

Dissent PR – the women’s perspective: From Suffragettes to Slutwalks’

Women can be considered as reflecting a position of dissent as they operate outside the dominant masculine social power base. Female experiences have largely been missing from histories of public relations (Cutlip, 1994), although two early 20th century examples offer an outsider perspective. The Union activist, Mother Mary Harris Jones, was a skilled organiser and agitator, but is presented in PR literature only as the opponent of Ivy Ledbetter Lee, who is claimed to have been a professionalising pioneer in PR, despite having spread the lie that Jones was a ‘former whore-house madam’ (Martelle, 2008, p. 22). The same sexual slur was directed towards Bessie Tyler (Shotwell, 1974), co-owner of the Southern Publicity Association, whom Quarles (1999, p. 56) reveals was responsible for the growth of the Ku Klux Klan. This suggests that championing the concept of dissent PR may require “embracing the embarrassing” (Russell, 2010), as well as examining gendered representations of activist women.

The dissent PR model could also be applied to the suffragettes who championed female enfranchisement using protests and marches, combined with a level of civil disobedience, which, Lysack (2008) argues, gradually became more militant in its approach. In contrast to Jones and Tyler, these women were predominantly middle class and sought to present themselves as feminine rather than feminists.

Dress, sexualisation and stereotyping occur frequently when considering women as activists. For example, the 1970s feminist movement is represented in the context of bra burning. The protest PR activities of those involved in the women’s equal rights campaigns of this era have not been examined, neither has the role of women in movements such as the anti-nuclear women’s camp at the Greenham Common military base in the 1980s.

More recently, we can examine the 21st century Slut Walks phenomenon, which has become a global campaign advocating women’s rights. Ironically, the image of some of the women taking part in the Slut Walk protest marches wearing clothes often deemed as ‘slutty’ has attracted media attention, and led to the movement being criticised by feminists (Dines and Murphy, 2011) and branded as “the pornification of protest”.

As well as researching women’s experiences which may be considered to reflect dissent PR in challenging established social norms using protest PR techniques, the concepts raise the question of why there seems to be little engagement in such activism within the occupation, particularly as it is

increasingly dominated by women. Stephen (2000) found a lack of feminist scholarship in PR and communication journals. Where there is literature, it has tended to focus on issues relating to the increased feminisation of PR itself, and gender inequalities, rather than the role of PR in feminist activism. Such research seems to argue women in PR want to be respected within the mainstream rather than seeking a dissenting role.

In conclusion, the concepts of dissent and protest PR could be useful in expanding the historical understanding of public relations. They could also provide a focus on how women have used dissent and activist techniques to get their voices heard in society. A third consideration is the sexualisation and representation of women involved in dissent and protest PR. Finally, there is an opportunity to consider the nature of PR itself and where dissent and protest lie within the occupation where women comprise the majority of practitioners. For example, are they encouraged to be compliant communicators rather than agents for change within their organizations?

Overall, an initial consideration of the women's perspective indicates that the concepts of dissent and protest PR could open up new and fruitful avenues for research.'

Conclusion

Kevin Moloney's view on colleagues' comments is that the terms have some descriptive and analytical power. This is clearest in Heather's exploration of selected women PRs past and present. Its gender base allows a clear marker of difference from the 'dominant masculine social power base' of most PR practice: in the past most women using PR were dissenters and protestors. The terms match what the women she portrayed were doing: taking on dominant narratives from a subaltern position. They were being 'activist' of course, but the new terms are refining categories that allow Heather to give them better focused profiles.

The same refinement is seen at a systemic political level in Pawel's uses of them to better understand the communications of Solidarity. 'Activism' and 'propaganda' are accurate broad brush concepts into which our terms can drill down and describe more finely. At the verbal level of descriptive colouring, they signal more vividly the human dissent and protest of people in what was a 'dramatic struggle'.

David's description of the "PR war" between cause and pressure groups, and corporate interests opens with the reminder that activist groups strongly dislike the idea and practice PR. For them, it is the language of the 'enemy'. David situates this dislike 'within the critical and radical academic tradition' of PR studies. This rejectionist attitude should not, however, freeze out contemporary academic use of our terms. This is a partisan approach to our subject and its vocabulary that ignores the near-universal spread of PR into the communications of political economy and civil society. Once, PR was captured by the political and economic right: it should not now be put into a ghetto by the left. When David goes on to write of 'pluralist definitions of public relations are more inclusive', our terms are placed back into the academic toolkit. He has reminded us that the terms we use to describe and analyse PR phenomenon carry with them ideological freight. We should recognise that and scrap it off.

Readers and practitioners are invited to reflect on whether these terms add to their understanding.

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