

Can PR theory cope with the
Internet?

PR Theory

The dominant paradigm

- “functional, applied and initially focussed on systems theory, the ideal of symmetrical communication, the four models based on US history, excellence, effectiveness, public relations roles (manager-technician dichotomy, and gender), situational theory and quantitative research.” (L’Etang, 2008, p. 252).

There are alternative theories

Criticisms of dominant paradigm

- The definition of PR as a management function
- The reliance on functional, transmission models of communication
- The emphasis on organisational level theory
- The failure to recognize the importance of power in relationships
- Based on US history and practice

- “We need new ways of visualising and conceptualising the communication nexus – and perhaps new metaphors” (Gregory & Fawkes, 2000 p. 122)
- “As Stakeholder strength increases PR practitioners will have to develop strategies that deal with the rising power of different communities on the Web” (van der Merwe, Pitt & Abratt, 2005, p. 39).

The Circuit of Culture

- Curtin & Gaither (2005 & 2007)
- “too much public relations activity is taking place around the world that current theoretical approaches to international public relations don’t recognize, don’t support and can’t explain”

The Circuit of Culture

- Public relations practitioners can be seen as “cultural intermediaries, mediators between producers and consumers who actively create meanings by establishing an identification between products or issues and publics.” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007 p. 41)
- The model can “overcome the limitations of the dominant functionalist, transmission-based paradigm by positioning public relations as a meaning-making practice within a ritualistic, non-linear view of communication as a dynamic process.” (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 105).

The circuit of culture has five moments in a process that work together in a share space in which meaning is shaped modified and recreated.

- Representation
- Production
- Consumption,
- Identity
- Regulation

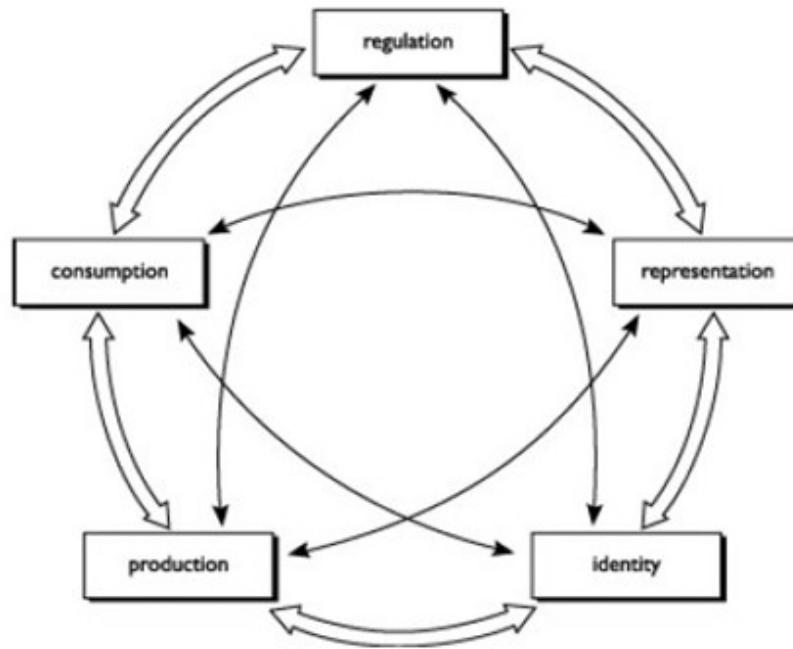


FIGURE 1 The circuit of culture (from du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997).

The diagram depicts these five moments as being separate though the model holds that “in the real world they continually overlap and intertwine in complex and contingent ways” (du Gay et al, 1997 p. 4)

Production: The moment of production outlines the process by which creators of cultural products (such as the messages crafted by public relations practitioners) imbue them with meaning. In the context of public relations we could think of this as the process of campaign planning. (Curtin Gaither, 2007, p. 39)

Questions to ask	Actions to take
<p>What online communities exist that could be relevant to the public relations programme? How many people are active in these communities?</p>	<p>Practitioners should research existing online communities and think about them in terms of the other moments in the circle of culture.</p>
<p>Who are the opinion leaders in existing communities?</p>	
<p>Should the organisation establish a presence in existing online communities? Or try and create a new one? What sort of community would be appropriate? blog? web forum? other?</p>	

regulation: The moment of regulation encompasses all attempts to control cultural activity – including public relations activity. Before initiating any activity in online communities we should consider whether there are any formal or legal controls on such activity as well as controls coming from the technologies used within the communities and the informal controls of cultural norms and expectations (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 103).

Questions to ask	Actions to take
<p>Are there any legal constraints on the public relations activities proposed. This could be particularly relevant in the fields of financial public relations for example.</p>	<p>Practitioners should identify hidden social or cultural regulations. They should consider “lurking” in the communities or interview key informants before participating.</p>
<p>Are there any formal restrictions imposed on participants in relevant online communities? Acceptable Use Policies, or moderation for example?</p>	
<p>What restrictions are imposed by the communication technologies used within online communities? Are they text only? Text plus features? Are there many users who don't have access to broadband?</p>	
<p>What are the attitudes of members of these communities towards public relations and/or promotional activities? Do these attitudes vary depending on the status of the person or organisation involved?</p>	
<p>Are the activities of outsiders seen differently from the activities of</p>	

Identity: In this model identities are meanings given to a particular object or group. They comprise a multitude of socially constructed meanings and practices.

Public relations often involves creating identities for individuals by defining them as members of publics, often using demographic, psychographic or situational terms. Within the circuit of culture model, publics are understood as being dynamic, loosely grouped individuals who actively appropriate and negotiate multiple identities.

Organisations themselves have identities that they may try to control through corporate identity and reputation management programmes. Public relations practitioners create organisational texts putting forward identities they want to convey and around which they try to structure subsequent discourse. But such identities are continuously renegotiated by consumers of the texts.

Questions to ask	Actions to take
How are publics being defined? What rationale is being used?	Recognise that publics defined by practitioners are just a starting point – representing static artificial identities. The definitions need to be continuously monitored.
What organisational identities already exist? Are we going to want to build on these identities? Or create new ones?	Recognise that organisational identities can change sometimes very quickly.
Are there different identities in different online communities?	Recognise that new publics may emerge during the course of a campaign.

Representation: is the form an object takes and the meanings encoded in that form. In public relations terms practitioners encode meaning into campaign materials. They try and convey a certain meaning by controlling all aspects of how they present such materials, content, format and even the method of distribution can convey meaning.

But remember that publics create their own meanings when they consume these materials.

Questions to ask	Actions to take
Do all aspects of campaign materials (eg text, symbols, graphics colours) support the intended representation?	Practitioners should ensure that someone familiar with the relevant online communities scrutinise campaign messages.
What competing discourses could publics bring to bear on campaign materials?	

Consumption: Consumption is the moment when messages are interpreted (or decoded) by members of target publics. Failures in public relations campaigns can be attributed to meanings that arise during this moment when members of target publics put their own meanings to any communication exchange. The possibilities inherent in the production of any message can only become actualized through consumption – which can itself become a new form of production when new meanings emerge (Curtin & Gaither, 2007 p. 41).

In online communities members can speedily communicate their own meanings to other members of the community.

Questions to ask	Actions to take
What new meanings arise when messages are interpreted by members of the community?	Practitioners must monitor how audiences interpret public relations messages and take appropriate actions.
How do members of the community use the public relations messages?	Practitioners must take account of changing audience uses and meanings and adjust public relations programmes as appropriate.
What new discourses arise?	

Problems with the model

- Doesn't say much about relationships.
- Fails to differentiate adequately between public relations and marketing.

Theories do not have to be right to be enormously useful. (Toffler)