

Public relations and trust in contemporary global society: A Luhmannian perspective of the role of public relations in enhancing trust among social systems



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ABSTRACT: This article provides a theoretical conceptualization of the role of public relations in society based on the “organic theory” of public relations and on Luhmann’s systems theory as well as on the concept of trust. In a postmodern, hypercomplex society, we claim that the main role of public relations is to strengthen system interactions through the creation of trust among systems. To enhance, maintain and ensure trust, public relations practitioners must think, not only strategically, but “metastrategically,” beginning with a normative theory of society that is built on the foundation of existing social theory, e.g. Luhmann, but also on contemporary social theory that must be built within a framework of communication technology.

KEYWORDS: public relations, organic theory of public relations, systems theory, Luhmann, trust, contemporary society, metastrategy



INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is experiencing unprecedented and increasingly egalitarian information access, tremendous changes in the dynamics — and perhaps the effects — of mass media, and increasing migrations among the global population, all of which have exacerbated cultural tensions worldwide. We live in an era in which communication barriers are more ideological than physical. Space and time have surrendered to the World Wide Web, and social relationships have changed dramatically and are more viral than ever. This is a century of immense uncertainty; nothing is secure or stable in global society (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2007), and confu-

society by looking at the interrelationships and interconnections among the three major systems, i.e. governments, civil society organizations (nongovernmental organizations), and corporations, *vis-à-vis* public relations' role in fostering these interrelationships and connections (Holmström, 2005) as well as at the role of trust — intended as an irreducible and multidimensional social reality (Luhmann, 1979; 1988).

FEARS OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The 21st century is considered by many social scientists as the era of globalization, post-industrialization, and postmodernism. While the development of new technologies and means of communication have eliminated previous barriers that have restricted people in their communication, at least among those in regions of the world where access to these resources is widespread, societies throughout the world appear today to be both more complex and more unstable than could have been reasonably predicted. In fact, the presumed certainties of modern global society have been replaced by an extended incredulity among individuals about ostensible indicators of “progress” and of science, i.e. a suspicion about any assumed claims. Jean-François Lyotard, in his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), describes contemporary society as being pervaded by incredulity toward all metanarratives, that is to say, characterized by an increasing scepticism toward those claims that assert to tell an absolute truth. This uncertainty toward modern science has also raised questions among philosophers such as Prigogine and Stengers (1984) about the foundation of our knowledge. New modes of expression and alternative ways to combine styles, genres, and worldviews have emerged (Christensen, Torp & Firat, 2005). This is the era of postmodernism or, in Qvortrup's (2003) words, the age of hypercomplexity. Hypercomplexity represents second-order complexity, or complexity inscribed within complexity, such as when one observer describes another observer's description of a particular phenomenon. Qvortrup (2003) argues that our emerging society can be characterized as a polycentric and polycontextual social system that applies different codes of self-observation related to different positions of observation in society. Accordingly, organizations and societies are not evolving toward some final state of total control guided by unlimited rationality. Rather, stability is a “dynamic state of equilibrium in which mechanisms and procedures for mutual observation and communication have developed to neutralize tendencies toward social entropy” (Qvortrup, 2003, p. 5). The 21st century is thus a time in which different realities, i.e. different “truths,” are possible, where events and situations are three-dimensional, and where universal objectivity does not exist.

Postmodern, hypercomplex society, however, destabilized organization–public relationships in several ways. In marketing, for example, postmodernism is affecting the way in which consumers understand, interpret, and consume companies' prod-

net has escalated in all of its possible utility, from a tool of information-seeking and information-sharing to a medium of social-gathering, entertaining, and even providing a relational place, e.g. chat rooms that promise to find “your other half.”

The Internet, with its social media applications, seems to promise a different approach for organization–public relationships that takes into consideration the hypercomplexity of today’s society. However, these new social media hold publics in a state of continuing uncertainty because people lose those traditional parameters that had allowed them to evaluate received traditional communications and their scopes (Valentini, 2010). In cyberspace, everyone can be anyone, can deconstruct and reconstruct his/her identity, and can create stories and metanarratives that may or may not be real, factual, or objective. There is no assurance about the accuracy of what is read, viewed, or listened to in the Internet sphere.

The scarcity of certainty in the different subsystems of society and the ambiguity that pervades this postmodern, hypercomplex society brings us to reconsider the concept of “trust” and its potential role in 21st century global society. However, before presenting and discussing trust, we shall review Luhmann’s systems theory as a general postulation for assessing the role of public relations as a communicative function to enable system-discursive interactions and to support trust among systems, trust being one of the preconditions for the existence of society.

SOCIETIES AS COMMUNICATIVE SYSTEMS

Postmodern societies are hypercomplex systems of interrelationships resulting from people’s evolution into more complex “thinking” entities. In sociological terms, a society consists of a group of people who are related to one another by continuing relationships, such as social status, roles, social networks, culture, and institutions. Technological, as well as general knowledge, developments have influenced the way in which societies as aggregations of people have advanced. We still have societies throughout the world which are based on traditions and norms that, from a developed nation perspective, appear to be “traditional.” But we also have societies, e.g. China and some Eastern European countries, that have moved quickly from less developed economies to emerging capitalistic ones, and some countries worldwide have newly emerging more democratized forms of government. Societies, just as human beings, can change and evolve and/or regress more quickly or slowly, depending on contextual factors and situations. Societies are living organisms that seek adaptation to survive and to compete with one another. This concept of societies as living organisms or “systems” was used by Luhmann (1984; 1995) to describe social, psychological, and organic systems. Observing the evolution of Western societies, Luhmann realized that general theories of society were insufficient to explain the changes that had occurred during the final decades of the 20th century. For him, society was better explained if it were conceived of as consisting of different systems, not having a centre or unity, but instead a composition

actions and interactions, society reproduces itself and survives. The role of communication as an interactive process of exchange of ideas, feelings, and opinions is that of enabling different systems to evolve and to develop. In other words, communication, as the externalization of what people and organizations within particular subsystems understand of society, is the means by which society, itself, changes. It is through its discursive definition that society expresses itself in its entirety and in its contradictions, juxtapositions, and even complexity. In Luhmann's systems theory, we cannot conceive of society without conceiving of communication because "even the communication of not wanting to communicate is communication. In practice, one cannot not communicate in an interaction system; one must withdraw if one wants to avoid communication" (Luhmann, 1997, p. 413). Yet, this idea that society is not only maintained by communication, but is also constituted by communication, is not new. John Dewey in 1916 also conceptualized society as being comprised of communication.¹

Luhmann's systems theory, with its concept of society as a communication system, not only provides us a *raison d'être* for the existence of our professionalized occupation of public relations, but also supports the role of public relations in society. If societies are comprised of communication and if subsystems of society need communication to reproduce, adapt, and change themselves, and if the role of public relations is to enhance the flow of communication among organizations and publics of any type, thereby facilitating the process of communication among these different systems and subsystems, then public relations for contemporary postmodern societies is not only important, it is essential for the survival of society itself. Furthermore, if societies are hypercomplex and in continuously changing status, different systems and subsystems comprised by society require a level of familiarity and even trust in the different mechanisms of interactions and communicative discourses to autopoietically live and develop. Trust, thus, becomes an important factor that helps interactions among systems and that facilitates communication flows among systems.

TRUST AND SOCIETY

In environments in which uncertainty and ambiguity prevail, either as intrinsic dimensions of a specific environment or as the consequences of an external malfunction, e.g. during crisis situations, the concept of trust is critically important to explain both relationships among systems and people as well as among individuals. Trust becomes a functional prerequisite for the existence of society because the only alternatives to appropriate trust are "chaos and paralysing fear" (Luhmann, 1979, p. 4). The very essence of trust is related to the concepts of instability and

¹ See Kückelhaus (1998) for more information on John Dewey's 1916 concept of society as being comprised of communication.

and thus is agent- and context-specific. System Trust is not based on any property or state of the trustee, but rather on the perceived properties of or reliance on the system or institution within which that trust exists. Dispositional Trust describes the general trusting attitude of the trustor. This is “a sense of basic trust, which is a pervasive attitude toward oneself and the world” (Erikson, 1968, p. 96). Therefore, it is independent of any party or context.

For many decades, the notion of trust, and particularly of Dispositional Trust and Interpersonal Trust, as institution-based has been widely accepted in several literatures, especially in organizational theory and management studies, to understand social interaction and the need for a social order (Möllering, 2006, p. 355). Trust has also been studied from the perspective of ontological security and commitments (Giddens, 1984; 1990; 1991), as a part of social capital (Fukuyama, 1995), in the context of welfare and democracy (Inglehart, 1997; 1999; Hardin, 1999), and as an important historical concept (Seligman, 1997). Furthermore, System Trust, specifically trust in the societal system, has been examined by a fairly large number of political scientists and sociologists, such as Barber (1983), Dunn (1988), Coleman (1990), Putnam (1995), Sztompka (1999), Warren (1999), and Cook (2001). Especially in the realm of the public sector, trust has been discussed in public administration/management schools in relation to the development of democratic systems and particularly to the development of public organizations and citizens' relationships. The findings of these studies show, in fact, a correlation between the level of trust in a society and the level of well-being of that society (Rothstein, 2004; van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003; Nyhan, 2000). So-called trusting societies have governments that redistribute wealth from the rich to the poor, that spend more on education, and that pursue policies that will stimulate economic growth. Trusting societies in democratic regimes pursue programmes that indirectly boost faith in others (Uslaner, 2003). According to Ilmonen and Jokinen (2002), nation-states capable of creating a culture of trust are reported to be on many levels the most successful, not to mention that trust also affects the level of public involvement (Valentini, 2008).

Of particular relevance for our discussion of the role of public relations in contemporary society is the concept of System Trust, as conceptualized by Luhmann, which has influenced most of the recent studies on the subject. System Trust is the extent to which one believes that proper impersonal structures are in place to enable an individual to anticipate a successful future endeavour (Luhmann, 1979; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Shapiro, 1987). Personal attributes of the other are not an issue with System Trust. System Trust does not derive from emotion, but rather has a “presentational” base that “is activated by the appearance that ‘everything seems in proper order’” (Lewis & Weigert, 1985, p. 974). Positive experience with the system also can contribute to increased trust.

McKnight and Chervany (1996) distinguish two types of System Trust: the structural assurance and the situational normality. The former refers to such

mechanisms of safeguards as regulations, guarantees, and contracts (Shapiro, 1987; Zucker, 1986), the latter to the role that people have in a situation (Baier, 1986) that presupposes a state of normality or “proper order” (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Both structural assurance and situational normality types of System Trust can be maintained by means of communication and through constructive and mutually beneficial relationships among the different systems through which a society is composed. In this respect, the role of public relations would be that of establishing mechanisms of trust among systems and between systems and individuals, so as to keep open the channels of communication and to facilitate the occasions for creating relationships.

LUHMANN AND THE ORGANIC THEORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Along with Luhmann’s idea of society as being comprised of systems and sub-systems that are at the same time interdependent and dependent on one another, the organic theory of public relations, as conceptualized by Vujnovic and Kruckeberg (2005) and tested by Vujnovic, Kumar, and Kruckeberg (2007, March), proposes organic interrelationships among elements in social systems that are mutually constituted. This organic theory also emphasizes the community-building function of public relations (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001) and is of particular value in social/economic/political systems that have undergone rapid transformation to a more individualistic social system, to a more capitalistic economic system, and to a more democratic political system (Kruckeberg, 2006). Kruckeberg (1995–1996; 2006) claims that democratic societies can and will exist in the 21st century only through the support of — and directly resulting from — the cooperative community-building efforts of governments, civil society organizations, and corporations, the last of which provides, not only goods and services, but also employment, a tax base, and other social benefits. Kruckeberg metaphorically describes the relationships of governments, civil society organizations, and corporations as the three legs of a stool, each of them supporting part of the weight of society but that collectively are able to do so better than can the sum of their weight-bearing parts individually, and he sees the central task of public relations as that of creating, restoring, and maintaining the linkages among these three legs of the stool (Kruckeberg, 2006). When cross-braced with one another in mutual purpose, they provide more strength to support society than these three do additively, i.e. allowing the whole of this three-part foundation of society to become stronger than the sum of this foundation’s parts. From a Luhmannian perspective, the three legs of the stool represent three specific social systems with their own unique purposes, priorities, needs, and identities.

In later years, the organic theory of public relations has gained further relevance, especially in relation to the increasing reconsiderations by organizations, especially private ones, of their role and function within society and *vis-à-vis* their

responsibility in society. Vujnovic, Kumar, and Kruckeberg (2007) argue, in fact, for an “organic model” of public relations that focuses and is predicated upon the need for “community” and “community-building” as conceptualized by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) and Starck and Kruckeberg (2001). Such an “organic model” of public relations would have benefits for every organization and every individual, and it would even support organizational legitimization in interrelation to different and changing forms of societal coordination as conceptualized by Holmström (2005). But, above all, these authors argue that society-at-large is also a primary beneficiary of the organic model of public relations, which shares many perspectives and values espoused by Luhmann as well as by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) and Starck and Kruckeberg (2001). Similarly, Ihlen and van Ruler (2007) propose a societal perspective in reconceptualizing the role of public relations in postmodern society. Accordingly, society-at-large becomes “the unit of analysis and considers its social structure and institutions as the basis and the outcome of public relations. This implies that the main interest is not the corporation or organization itself, but its place in society at large” (Ihnen & van Ruler, 2007, p. 245).

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

If public relations practitioners are to ensure confidence in relationships with their organizations’ publics within a context of community, which confidence we argue is at the core of public relations practice, and if trust can strengthen system interactions, which are the forces that maintain society as Lloyd (1901) had argued over a century ago, then — in an uncertain world filled with conflicting messages and considerable uncertainty and trepidation — the public relations practitioners’ role is fundamentally to enhance, maintain, and ensure trust within the context of community as conceptualized “organically.” However, trust can only exist where it is deserved, i.e. such trust cannot be betrayed. A requisite of trust is the reasonable prediction and anticipation of an action by an actor based on that actor’s prior behaviour and other communication.

Thereby, the role of public relations in postmodern, hypercomplex society should be reconceptualized *vis-à-vis* the assumption that publics are now more active, more knowledgeable, and more empowered in their decisions, and thus these publics must be engaged and involved more than in the past in the construction of values and meanings of public, private, and non-profit organizations. From this perspective, even the commonly accepted view of scholars and practitioners that public relations is a strategic management function should be reconsidered and requalified according to a societal approach. Public relations practitioners are educated to think “strategically,” primarily within the framework of a sender–receiver, i.e. transmission, model of communication in which receivers, i.e. audiences, are not active players in constructing meaning, arguably the case even in the idealized two-way symmetrical model/dimension as conceptualized by Grunig and Hunt

(1984). Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) contrast the transmission view of communication that connotes communicatively doing something *to* someone with an alternative model, which they note may have predated the former, that stresses the “communal” or “communitarian” aspect of communication, sometimes called “ritual.” The latter model connotes communicatively doing something *with* someone. They observe that public relations early adopted and continues to apply the transmission model of communication, which is rooted in persuasion and advocacy rather than in social involvement and participation. It is the latter model, i.e. “ritual,” in which trust can and will be built.

“Communal” or “communitarian” communications presume a societal approach in practising public relations, which, according to a Luhmannian perspective, requires a reckoning of other elements, systems, and subsystems of society and their peculiarities. These are, in fact, important factors for public relations’ communicative function to enable system-discursive interactions and to support trust among systems, the latter of which is one of the preconditions for the existence of society.

These theoretical foundations for public relations, thus, point to the need for a consideration of differing perspectives about communication and strategic thinking. In a postmodern, hypercomplex 21st century in which communication is an intervening variable that has created globalism and its obverse, multiculturalism, we argue that there is a greater “metastrategy” of which practitioners must become aware, for which they must prepare, and which promises even greater benefits for both their organizations — be they governments, civil society organizations, or corporations — and for society-at-large. In accordance with this “metastrategy,” models of public relations must extend beyond “strategies” and “strategic publics” to include a “metastrategy” that is grounded in a theory of society. As Kruckeberg (1995–1996) noted, Hardt’s mandate for a requisite theory of society to study mass communication is equally pertinent for the consideration of the role and function of public relations. Hardt (1979) concluded:

[T]he study of mass communication can make sense only in the context of a theory of society; thus, questions of freedom and control of expression, of private and public spheres of communication, and of a democratic system of mass communication must be raised as part of an attempt to define the position of individuals in contemporary industrialized Western societies. (Hardt, 1979, p. 35)

A metastrategic approach based on a sustainable theory of society also requires redefining the role of public relations, taking into consideration the porosity and interconnectivity of the different systems that society comprises. Ihlen and van Ruler (2007) argue, in fact, that the role of public relations should not be of simply maintaining and cultivating relationships of an organization with its publics, but it should rather address how an organization relates itself to the public arena and society-at-large. Kruckeberg (1995–1996) argues that the public relations practitioners will be as “keepers and reconcilers” who can examine, maintain, and modify as necessary indigenous organizational and societal values and belief systems

in which values, beliefs, and ideologies will be continually challenged. Along with this line of thought, Vujnovic (2004), for example, provided a normative model about how public relations practitioners' individual values and worldviews should influence organizational culture, exploring how these individual values and worldviews should influence the choice of public relations models and ultimately should define the character of the organization. Known values, beliefs, and ideologies of an organization are the requisites to trust, upon which society members can reasonably predict and anticipate an action by an organization based on that organization's prior behaviour and other communication.

Hence, public relations practitioners must be students of society who possess a longitudinal, i.e. historical, understanding of society, their clients' publics, and other immediate organizational stakeholders as well as of society-at-large, and they must have a highly knowledgeable latitudinal, indeed *global*, perspective. Within such context, the social theories presented here, as well as other social theories, both classical and contemporary, can be heuristic in examining what Kruckeberg (1995–1996) has admonished public relations practitioners to consider. He said that public relations must consider theories of society that can satisfactorily transcend narrow political ideologies to which practitioners provide lip service, e.g. democracy and capitalism. Hence, the proposed metastrategy in professional practice bridges theoretical conceptualizations that view organizations as interdependent and communicative-discursive systems of society with those that qualify communication as a “communal” or “communitarian” activity. Both postulations, as we have seen, can enhance trust among different systems and provide greater values for organizations and for society-at-large.

CONCLUSIONS

We live in an ambiguous world in which truths are uncertain and are continually being challenged. Authority, moral and otherwise, in many respects no longer exists. We belong to multiple communities, both physical and virtual. Kruckeberg and Tsetsura (2008) argue that “tribalism” represents today's most threatening form of dysfunctional communities as fundamentalist extremists of many kinds use demagoguery to form communities of the disenfranchised, which communication technology has allowed them to act more effectively. This “tribalism” is a rebellion against modern mass-mediated society and against nationalism and secularism by those who seek to reestablish ostensibly more idyllic and more predictable traditional unmediated societies. Today, tribalism is the primary threat to modern global society. Public relations practitioners, we argue, must be at the epicentre of trust-building for their organizations, whether these are governments, civil society organizations, or corporations. Trust, however, is a phenomenon that can only exist when it is deserved, i.e. when society members can reasonably predict and anticipate an action by an actor based on that actor's prior behaviour and other com-

munication; with betrayal, trust cannot exist. This role of public relations in the 21st century is certainly among the most important of any professionalized occupation in organizations as well as in contemporary society-at-large. To enhance, maintain and ensure trust, public relations practitioners must think, not only strategically, but metastrategically, beginning with a normative theory of society that is built on the foundation of existing social theory, e.g. Luhmann, as well as on evolving social theory that must be built within the framework of communication technology as an intervening variable that — short of cataclysmic societal changes — has created increasing globalism while attempting to reconcile the exacerbating challenges of its obverse, multiculturalism. These models — as well as other sociological perspectives, both classical and contemporary — should be examined by the public relations scholarly community and must be tested continually by the practitioner community with the hope that a theory of society and of public relations can evolve that encourages metastrategic public relations practice as the normative model.

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