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# Public relations in a postmodern world

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## Abstract

This article uses Holtzhausen's dichotomy of public relation's modernist principles and the public's postmodern expectations as a means of framing a discussion of public relations in a postmodern world. The following questions are addressed: What does it mean to say that public relations is modernist and its public is postmodern? What are the implications of this dichotomy for the ways in which public relations practice and scholarship are spoken about and understood? Drawing upon the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Umberto Eco, it is argued that a postmodern perspective allows one to consider public relations as a narrative; that is, a way of talking about the world, the people in that world and public relations' relationship with those people. The use of postmodernism here is intended to foreground the ways in which public relations is talked about, and the implications of these ways of talking.

## Keywords

Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, narratives, postmodernism, public relations, Umberto Eco

Contemporary public relations efforts are 'balancing acts between management practices based on modernist principles of command and control and the postmodern expectations of those people who constitute the organization's multicultural, multiethnic, and gendered internal and external publics'. (Derina Holtzhausen, 2000: 93)

Contemporary Western society has frequently been referred to as a postmodern society (Best and Kellner, 1991; Jameson, 1991; Jencks, 1989). The philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard begins his influential analysis of what he terms the 'postmodern condition' with the observation that 'the miniaturization and commercialization of machines is already

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changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited' (1989: 4). From this perspective, a postmodern society is unabashedly high-tech, with citizens having access to unprecedented computer and media connectivity. Lyotard published his report on the postmodern condition in 1979, years before the contemporary ubiquitousness of the Internet, social media, and cell phones and their significant ramifications for democratic processes and the world of work and business (see Friedman, 2005). Technology has made connectivity possible on a truly global scale, so much so that we have a term, 'globalization', which signifies the extent to which 'our lives are becoming increasingly intertwined with those of distant people and places around the world – economically, politically and culturally' (Legrain, 2004: 4).

In 1979, Lyotard recognized that such technological and cultural development was not only transforming the means by which information is physically distributed and made available in a society. He made the further claim that, 'The nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation' (Lyotard, 1989: 4). Lyotard interprets these trends as constituting a new form of 'postmodern condition' in which forms of knowledge and information, and the citizen's relationship to these forms, are fundamentally different from those that came before (Best and Kellner, 1991: 3).

Public relations (PR) is a significant player in the creation and distribution of information in the contemporary world. Its purpose is to take advantage of the ways in which, to use Lyotard's words, 'learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited' (1989: 4). According to Holtzhausen, talking about PR in terms of information acquisition, transmission, distribution, and exploitation creates an understanding of PR that is inevitably fixed in 'management practices based on modernist principles of command and control' (2000: 93). Holtzhausen's use of the term 'modernist' is significant in a number of ways. She seems to be implying that PR practice is out-of-step with the 'postmodernist expectations of those people who constitute the organization's multicultural, multiethnic, and gendered internal and external publics' (2000: 93). This article will use Holtzhausen's dichotomy of PR's 'modernist principles' and the public's 'postmodern expectations' as a means of framing a discussion of PR in a postmodern world. What does it mean to say that PR is modernist and its public is postmodern? What are the implications of this dichotomy for the ways in which PR practice and scholarship are spoken about and understood?

It is argued here that the consideration of PR in terms of postmodernism is not about describing PR in a new and more useful way, or using a postmodern understanding of publics as a means to make PR campaigns more effective. Rather, a postmodern perspective allows one to consider PR as a narrative, a way of talking about the world, the people in that world, and PR's relationship with those people. To continue with Holtzhausen's claim, it is not that a modernist PR is out of step with a postmodern public, but rather that the manner in which PR talks about itself is in competition with a whole range of alternative narratives available to people in a postmodern culture. Postmodernism is about challenging existing and dominant ways of speaking about the world, and is not concerned with replacing these ways of speaking with another that claims to capture 'truth' or 'reality'. The use of postmodernism here is intended to foreground the ways in which PR is talked about, and the implications of these ways of talking. It does not claim to define what PR is, in some ontological sense, or to aid PR practitioners in their goal for greater communication effectiveness.

There are many voices that have much to say about the postmodern condition. Such voices include Jameson's (1991) discussion of postmodernism as a stage of late capitalism (or late modernity); the seminal work of Jacques Derrida (1974, 1978) discussing the role of writing, language and deconstruction; and Jean Baudrillard's (1988) treatment of signs in an age dominated by electronic media and digital technology. The discussion of postmodernism that forms the foundation for the claims made here will rely on the work of three particular postmodern theorists: Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Umberto Eco. The choice of these three writers is not to say that they have any specific privilege with respect to other major figures in the area, only that they offer a clear and useful guide that will enable the relationship between modernity, postmodernity, and PR to be considered. To this end, much of this article will be taken up with stories as a way to drive home the notion that a postmodern approach deals with narratives rather than realities. A dialogue between the two main characters in Umberto Eco's (1983a) novel *The Name of the Rose* is used to talk about the main distinctions between a modern and a postmodern view of knowledge and truth. Aesop's (2008) fable of the 'Ant and the Grasshopper' is presented as an example of a narrative that organizes and legitimates particular views of the world. Boorstin's (1985) story of a marketing event at a hotel is a narrative that captures dominant understandings of PR and its place within a modern capitalist society. It is claimed here that much of what might be termed the postmodern condition is concerned with the conflict and uncertainty people experience when exposed to different kinds of stories and narratives, especially when these stories constitute different kinds of realities and values. The article will address different ways in which PR theorists and practitioners talk about themselves, and show that there are also conflicting narratives and stories to be found there. A postmodern perspective is not intended to sort these narratives out, or to suggest that one narrative is better than any other, or to offer recommendations about how knowledge of narratives can make PR practitioners better at their jobs. Rather the objective is to consider PR in its status as a narrative, and to claim, along with Holtzhausen, that this narrative is out of step with the publics that PR practitioners serve. The article begins with a consideration of what is meant by the modern and the postmodern.

## **From the modern to the postmodern: The narratives of science**

To summarize what Holtzhausen means by the term 'modernist principles' would require the telling of a whole social history embracing western cultural movements in the late 19th and 20th centuries and trends in architecture, art and religion (see Jencks, 1989). For the purposes of this discussion, modernism will be characterized by a particular way of talking about and relating to the world that is based in two largely unquestioned assumptions: (1) that there exists a singular reality; and, (2) that this reality can be discovered and described by the methods of science (see Habermas, 1990). There is, of course, more to modernism than this, but these two modernist assumptions will provide the grounds on which one can compare and contrast modernism with postmodernism, and locate PR within that distinction.

That reality exists is seen by many as simply common sense. Why would one even question such a claim? In the PR context, practitioners know that messages exist, communication channels exist, audiences exist and responses to messages exist. They also

know that the proper manipulation of these realities can create desirable outcomes. Considered in these terms, PR shares the same outlook and assumptions as positivist science, which manipulates aspects of an external reality through experimentation and hypothesis testing to derive knowledge about that reality. As Holtzhausen succinctly states, 'public relations theory is embedded in positivism' (2000: 96).

The modernist principle of a singular reality finds its most powerful expression in the institution of science (Lyotard, 1989). Therefore, a consideration of the modernist assumptions of science and, in particular, the role of language within science, will provide the basis needed to articulate an understanding of the *post*-modern, where the assumptions of the modern are systematically challenged. This step is captured succinctly by a brief exchange of dialogue that takes place between the two protagonists of Umberto Eco's (1983a) novel, *The Name of the Rose*.

A significant part of Eco's story concerns the efforts of Adso, a young novice monk, and William, his master, to reveal the scheme of the labyrinth through which a 13th-century library is organized. They are doing this in order that they may 'find the truth' (a modernist assumption – there is a truth which can be found) concerning a series of grisly murders at a medieval abbey. After their first covert visit to the library's interior, Adso and William emerge after a confusing, and frightening, encounter with the labyrinth's structure, and the following exchange takes place:

'How beautiful the world is, and how ugly labyrinths are,' [Adso] said, relieved.

'How beautiful the world would be if there were a procedure for moving through labyrinths,' my master [William] replied. (1983a: 206).

Let us consider each statement in turn and how they articulate the distinction between a modernist and a postmodernist understanding of science and language.

### *'How beautiful the world is ...'*

The term 'science' is used to refer to the institutionalized practices involved with the discovery, articulation and dissemination of objective knowledge. To this end, the scientist carries out activities with the implicit understanding that there exists a world and an objective body of facts that are independent of the practices intended to discover them. This understanding is reflected in Adso's assertion that the 'world *is*', and that the accuracy, objectivity, and truthfulness of the knowledge discovered by the scientist makes reference to something that *in fact occurs* in the objective world. The motion of planets, the atomic structure of matter, the nature of chemical reactions, and the functions of living cells, represent facts that scientists can discover and describe. In their ideal form, the accounts of scientists are accounts of what the world is really like. As Van Fraassen puts it, 'the picture which science gives us of the world is a true one, faithful in its details, and the entities postulated in science really exist: the advances of science are discoveries, not inventions' (1980: 6–7).

The world cannot speak for itself. The task of science is to provide the world with a language in which its natural laws and structures can be expressed. As Hesse describes, 'science is ideally a linguistic system in which true propositions are in one-to-one relation

to facts, including facts that are not directly observed because they involve hidden entities or properties' (1981: xi). The ultimate objective of the practices of science is to match the structure of linguistic statements to the real structures of the world. Knowledge is mediated to others through discourse (acts of speaking and writing) and is made manifest in texts, which become the permanent records of those acts. Therefore, one can acquire knowledge about the world by locating the appropriate texts that contain it. This view motivates Adso's claim that the labyrinth inside the library is 'ugly.' The labyrinth has prevented him from knowing the beauty of the world because it has prevented him from accessing the knowledge that is contained in the texts housed in the library.

### 'How beautiful the world would be ...'

William's reply to Adso contains the essence of what can be considered a postmodern understanding of science and its relationship with language. William responds: 'How beautiful the world *would be* if there was a procedure for moving through labyrinths' (Eco, 1983a, p. 206, italics added). William's view is that the *procedure* for moving through the labyrinth of texts is primary to the objective world the texts purport to represent. The world can only be conceived of as beautiful when appropriate procedures for organizing knowledge claims are in place such that the claim of beauty with respect to a world could be expressed at all. The world *would be* beautiful (not *is* beautiful in Adso's absolute sense) only if one can traverse the labyrinth that would make this particular claim possible and meaningful. In other words, the claim to beauty has a place allocated for it in the labyrinth. If no place exists, then the beauty of the world would not be expressible and would therefore not exist for that community of discourse users. For William, the beauty of the world is *contingent*, rather than absolute and universal.

William's view of language and scientific knowledge holds in abeyance the self-evidence of an objective reality and focuses attention on the linguistic forms that are available to scientists to express what reality is like. Essentially, this entails substituting the term 'knowledge' (as if knowledge were a thing that is captured and reflected by language) with the term 'knowledge claims' (an act of speaking – one *makes* a claim). A knowledge claim is always an appearance of discourse, manifest as a speech act that is produced with respect to other claims. Taken together, a body of knowledge is constituted by the ways in which particular texts are put into relationships with other texts. Such arrangements are codified in the cataloging rules of a library, for example, where a book that is catalogued as 'psychology' is placed in physical proximity to other texts that have been similarly catalogued. A text is considered meaningful, not through what it says, but through how what is said is categorized and catalogued with respect to other texts. William's position is that knowledge of the world is constituted by and contingent upon the manner in which *claims to objective knowledge* are arranged and organized together. Thus, 'How beautiful the world *would be* if there was a procedure for moving through labyrinths': if only we knew how these texts were arranged and ordered with respect to one another. Only then would the beauty of the world be known. To know the world is to know the principles by which texts are organized, the system that determines which texts belong together and which texts should be kept apart. The world does not do this, people do, and according to particular social and historical conditions.

Like Eco's description of the library/labyrinth, the philosopher Michel Foucault argues that 'disciplines constitute a system of control in the production of discourse' (1972: 224). Scientific disciplines inevitably establish constraints on what can and what cannot be said, the way it is said and where it should be said if it is to count as an instance of knowledge. Even the choice of vocabulary, grammar and text structures are explicitly prescribed by style manuals. Anyone who has tried to have a manuscript published in an academic journal will be very familiar with the constraints demanded before publication is possible (see Myers, 1990). The *discourse* of scientific knowledge is subject to the demands of the labyrinth. Foucault argues that 'in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized, and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures' (1972: 216).

The key to understanding the production of scientific knowledge is not the phenomena, or the world, but the systems of speaking, of discourse, in which certain propositions about the world can *count as* objective and others cannot. Foucault's work consists of an analysis of the ways in which such discursive systems arise and how they can produce science, objectivity, and, ultimately, the nature of truth. He argues that such systems change and mutate over historical periods and with them what is considered objective and true. Scientific knowledge is not exclusively structured by objective phenomena in a real world, but by the limits of what it is possible to say at a given historical point with respect to a particular system of discourse. For Foucault, there is nothing tangible that lies beyond discourse that can be objectively described by a value-free scientific language. Foucault's accounts of the nature of madness (Foucault, 1988a), medicine (Foucault, 1975) and the human sciences (Foucault, 1970) are all accounts of such changes in discourse, of what it is possible to say, and the subsequent changes in the nature of objective facts. For Foucault, objectivity and truth are sites of struggle between competing systems of discourse. What is true or scientific at any particular historical juncture is determined by which system is *dominant* and not by which system is correct:

There is a battle 'for truth', or at least 'around truth' – it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean 'the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted', but rather 'the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true'. (Foucault, 1980: 132)

At any point in history, institutions arise to legitimate and fix the current version of knowledge and truth by institutionalizing, and controlling, the manner in which texts are ordered with respect to each other. In the library described in Eco's (1983a) *The Name of the Rose*, the truth is protected by a labyrinth. Foucault argues that scientific knowledge is similarly protected by the standards of institutionalized labyrinths 'such as pedagogy – naturally – the book system, publishing, [and] libraries' (Foucault, 1972: 219). Of interest to Foucault, and to postmodern scholars, are the means by which such institutionalized labyrinths come into being, how they privilege certain modes of knowledge and marginalize others, and how they change over historical time. Ultimately, the question is raised: how can these labyrinths be overcome? Is it possible to reach the exit and find new ways to order texts to produce new and different understandings of the world?



## The modernist principles of public relations

Holtzhausen (2000) claimed that contemporary practices of PR were based in modernist principles and one can now see how this can be so. Like those of science, the knowledge claims of PR work with a modernist sense of a singular reality that can be described, understood and ultimately exploited. Practitioners must work on the assumption that human behavior is the result of rational thought and irrational drives, and that the appropriate manipulation of those faculties will produce responses desirable to the sender. Without these assumptions, their work would not make sense. People must share a common underlying human nature, or a common neurological and cognitive apparatus in their heads. Individual responses to a message may vary, but the underlying cognitive information processing system must be the same. Therefore, if one can understand the nature of the underlying cognitive system, responses to messages can be predicted and ultimately controlled.

Like positivist science, prediction and control are key elements to PR's goal of making communication effective. As Heath points out, PR scholarship seeks to 'address how to make individual practitioners effective, and in doing so, to make organizations effective' (2009: 2). Similarly, Mickey has pointed out that 'Public relations practice has traditionally relied on a social science model of communication research. Thus, the goal is to see how one can make a campaign more effective' (2003: 66). Effectiveness, in this case, is determined by how well a PR message or campaign contributes toward the interests and goals of a client. The more the message contributes to those goals, whether it is increased sales, reputation or awareness, the more effective the communication has been. The model of communication built around the goal of effectiveness inevitably privileges the intent and meanings of the message creator and, more importantly, the message sponsor. A PR message must begin with a source, whose intent in creating the message is to produce a desired outcome in a target audience that is consistent with the goals of the sender. Thus, for example, a PR campaign might be commissioned, created and executed in order to maintain the reputation of Toyota following the mass recalls of its most popular models. The goal of the PR practitioner, and the client the practitioner is representing, is to have the target audience of the message think, talk and behave in ways that are beneficial to the bottom line of the Toyota Corporation. Toth argues that PR is modernist by virtue of this emphasis on particular goals and objectives such as changes in behavior, awareness, comprehension and attitudes (2002: 243).

To a PR practitioner, this much is simply common sense. However, such common sense only makes sense in the context of a modernist way of thinking that sees messages as material objects having material effects in a material world. But this understanding of PR, like that of science, is created and maintained by *particular ways of talking* about the world and the people in it. The people engaging in this discourse do not see it as discourse, and even less as a particular kind of discourse informed by a set of largely unacknowledged assumptions that go by the term *modernism*. As a consequence, all this talk about messages, transmission, and effectiveness ignores the 'postmodernist expectations of those people who constitute the organization's multicultural, multiethnic, and gendered internal and external publics' (Holtzhausen, 2000: 93). PR practitioners may talk about and understand the world in one way. But, as Lyotard (1989) forecast in 1979, the



rapid developments in communication technology, among other things, have transformed the ways in which citizens in a postmodern society interact, talk and constitute their world. It is to this postmodern world of PR's publics that we now turn.

## Postmodernism and the critique of meta-narratives

Lyotard (1989) claimed that a modernist society is one that operates with assumptions based on universal properties and principles, such as the belief in a singular objective reality. Such belief systems are articulated by what he calls grand or meta-narratives. Lyotard writes: 'I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse ... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative' (1989: xxiv). A meta-narrative is a kind of story that configures the past and positions the present in relation to where it is going. Such narratives serve to manage culture in ways that support dominant subject positions and benefit particular people. However, as societies become more pluralistic, grand narratives become challenged. The future and the past become contested, reducing the power and naturalness of the grand narrative, and putting in place competition among group-based smaller narratives.

In the US context, a good example of a meta-narrative is Aesop's (2008) fable of the 'Ant and the Grasshopper' (this example is taken from Deetz and Radford, in press). A person who grew up about 50 years ago knew only one 'Ant and the Grasshopper' story, which went something like this. During the summertime, the ants and the grasshopper are out in the wheat fields playing and singing. The ants are carefully gathering up the grain and storing it up for winter while the grasshopper hops around, having a good time, singing and dancing. The ants look at the grasshopper and say: 'Winter is coming. You should probably save for winter.' The grasshopper replies: 'Oh yes, someday I can get around to that. Chill out. Don't get uptight.' The winter comes and the ants are all underground in their nest, eating and having a good time. The grasshopper knocks at the door and asks: 'May I please come in? I'm starving. I'm cold. Let me in before I die.' And the ants reply: 'We told you all summer long. Go away!' This version of the story speaks of an entire concept of industry and work ethic within American society. The story provides an understanding of the past and guidance to the future. It says that over time good things will happen to people who save and are industrious and bad things will happen to people who are not. Entire political philosophies and social welfare systems and attitudes reside in the story.

In the 1960s, a rewrite of the story became popular. It shows an emerging difference in philosophy and values, and a challenge to the sensibility of the older story. The earlier part of the story is the same. The ants are still gathering grain and the grasshopper is still partying and in denial. But the end part of the story has a different lesson. Winter comes. The ants are underground with all the grain one could want but are bored out of their minds and miserable. The grasshopper comes to the door and says, 'Please let me in and share because I am freezing.' The ants open their door, the grasshopper comes in and sings and dances for them. He gives them merriment and excitement in an otherwise dull and boring life. He teaches them how to enjoy life. The narrative shows that the arts have a significant place in society and that life should not be lived for industry alone.

However, the competition among grand narratives is not over. The Ant and the Grasshopper story as retold by the Disney Studios in the movie *A Bug's Life* (Anderson

et al., 1998) becomes a distinctively 1990s version. In *A Bug's Life*, the ants busily collect grain but now there is a technologically minded geek (Flik) amongst them. The geek is trying to reduce their toil through inventions but keeps screwing things up (and, of course, he longs for the Princess). Most of the ants find him annoying and meddlesome. They are too busy frantically trying to get their work done before winter, and to set enough aside to appease the lazy parasitic grasshoppers.

In this new version of the narrative, the grasshoppers now represent the government and, in particular, the tax collector. They periodically come and take a percent of all the industry of the ants thus making their burden harder. The grasshoppers are fearsome. If the ants do not pay their percentage, the grasshoppers threaten to knock down their houses and steal their possessions. Flik, the little geeky hero, gets sent away, ends up in the circus with strange bugs, all of whom are different and a bit deficient, and through teamwork and trickery they return and defeat the grasshoppers. By the end of the story, the geek and free enterprise save the day. The toil of labor is lessened through reduced taxes and technological innovation. The geek is the hero and gets the princess.

As societies become more pluralistic, competing narratives occur across aspects of life. Stories proliferate about careers and career choices, how to do college, and what makes relationships work. But how do individuals move into the future together with very different narratives? How does society work with these differences? Questions and concerns like these form what Lyotard (1989) described as the 'postmodern condition;' the condition in which *people experience the ironies and contradictions that living in modernity inevitably produces*. It is also the condition in which people experience a profound awareness of the competing narratives that attempt to order and make sense of their lives. Jencks describes the condition as follows: 'The Post-Modern Age is a time of incessant choosing. It's an era when no orthodoxy can be adopted without self-consciousness and irony, because all traditions seem to have some validity' (1989: 7). Lyotard writes: 'I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives' (1989: xxiv).

As the incredulity toward meta-narratives becomes stronger, fundamental assertions of modernism are inevitably challenged and seen as untenable, just as the 1950s version of the 'Ant and the Grasshopper' narrative has little relevance to children growing up in 2012. Indeed, incredulity toward meta-narratives extends to the narrative put forward by postmodernism itself. How can one possibly claim that postmodernism is true or the correct way to understand society and culture in a postmodern condition where one is expected to express incredulity toward all meta-narratives, including the narrative of postmodernism? Jameson has argued that the concept, or narrative, of postmodernism 'is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory' (1991: xxii). Jameson continues: 'Postmodernism is not something we can settle once and for all and then use with a clear conscience. The concept, if there is one, has to come at the end, and not at the beginning of our discussions of it' (1991: xxii).

The postmodern account of meta-narratives is based upon notions of competition, contradiction, conflict and confusion. The goal is not to transcend this conflict and confusion, but rather to describe and embrace this condition as the way things are in the postmodern condition. The same is the case for the narratives used to describe, explain and position public relations. As shown in the next section, the ways in which one talks

about public relations is fraught with the same issues that face any meta-narrative attempting to fix the truth of things.

## A meta-narrative of public relations

Holtzhausen suggests that the contrast between PR's modernist focus on command and control and the postmodern expectations of its target audiences 'might explain why [PR's] well-intended practices do not always come up with the expected results' (2000: 95). There is a gap between the way in which PR practitioners talk about the world, and the ways in which people immersed in an information-dense postmodern society talk about the world. However, the problem is not confined to a mismatch between the narrative of PR and the many and competing narratives available to citizens in a postmodern society. A review of the definitions of PR within the scholarly literature reveals that there are also many and competing ways of talking about PR. Such competing ways of talking about PR lead to the conclusion that these multiple narratives are also subject to the irreconcilable contradictions of the postmodern condition. For example, in the *Handbook of Public Relations*, Robert Heath (2005) offers an entry on the term 'public relations' that reveals these potential contradictions. Heath writes:

Public relations can be defined as the art of stealthy manipulation of public opinion, the manipulation of opinions of consumers and politicians. It is viewed as spinning the truth to the selfish interest of some organization, issues advocate, person, or viewpoint. (2005: 679)

In the following paragraph, Heath notes that:

Public relations has been seen as a professional practice and academic discipline dedicated to fostering effective two-way communication between some organization or entity ... and persons whose opinions can make or break the future success of the sponsor. (2005: 679)

Then this:

Public relations is a set of management, supervisory, and technical functions that foster an organization's ability to strategically listen to, appreciate, and respond to those persons whose mutually beneficial relationships with the organization are necessary if it is to achieve its mission and vision. (2005: 680)

And finally this:

Public relations practitioners are problem solvers. They are counselors who advise the organizational management on how to fit best into its environment. They are tacticians and technicians who design and craft communication tools such as media releases, employee newsletters, fundraising campaigns, publicity and promotion efforts, investor reports, and issue backgrounders and fact sheets. (2005: 680).

Which one of these definitions is correct? (And what would one mean by 'correct' in this context?) Which definition best captures the 'reality' of PR and what PR practitioners do?

After all, PR is real. There actually are people known as PR practitioners, and they are doing something in the world. So what are these practitioners doing? Are they spin doctors, counselors, tacticians, scholars? Are they all of these things? Are they some of these things in one context, and other things in another? Is the definition of PR dependent on the position of the person offering the definition, or on the audience for which the definition is provided?

Reflecting on these various definitions and descriptions, Heath is left to conclude that 'no single definition of public relations exists' (2005: 680). But what does this mean? Does it mean that PR exists but there is no single way to define it? How can such a thing be possible? How can something exist if one cannot offer a definition of it, or if that definition keeps shifting?

Heath's conclusion is a sure sign of the postmodern condition, i.e., the recognition that there is no single meta-narrative that can cover all forms of what might be considered PR. Cheney and Christenson concur when they write that 'there is no single, coherent, or unbroken narrative to be told about public relations' (2001: 168). Similarly, Hutton writes that 'In terms of both theory and practice, public relations has failed to arrive at a broadly accepted definition of itself in terms of its fundamental purpose, its dominant metaphor, its scope, or its underlying dimensions' (1999: 199). Such assertions reveal that one cannot be given the one and true definition of what public relations *is*, in reality. Rather, one is compelled to *choose* among definitions, or at least recognize that definitions are contingent upon the context in which they are used, the times in which they appear, and the people who are using them. The task of postmodernism, then, would be to articulate the conditions that enable some definitions, such as those based in modernist assumptions, to gain dominance over others.

However, despite these surface differences in Heath's array of definitions, there is a modernist thread that continues to hold them all together: the explicit recognition that PR exists for the benefit of the commissioning organization. As Cheney and Christensen point out, the meta-discourse of PR 'grew out of a highly practical context and subsequently developed a theoretical apparatus to support the analysis and legitimation of its professional activity' (2001: 167). This meta-discourse asserts that the explicit purpose of PR is to maintain the status of private and public organizations that participate in the capitalist system. PR practitioners actively and purposefully promote vested interests against each other. They seek to control information to the advantage of the particular business, corporate and government interests that commission and pay them. Whether characterized as spin doctors, counselors, tacticians, or relationship managers, the meta-narrative of PR remains the same, and is invariably woven with the meta-narrative of capitalism.

Like the consideration of the 'Ant and the Grasshopper' story, postmodernism brings to awareness the possibility that the meta-narrative of PR and its relationship to capitalism is only one possible narrative. Deetz (1992) has written at length on the capacity of corporations to control and direct individual desires to support consumerism and not to question capitalism's exploitation. By treating the assumptions of public relations as a meta-narrative, like the 'Ant and the Grasshopper' story, the contradictions inherent in a modernist and capitalist discourse become apparent because one has access to more and different discourses to talk about them. For example, capitalism claims that individuals are free to pursue their individual dreams. At the same time, in order to be successful,

capitalism must control the needs and desires of individuals through monetary value. What does it mean to live in a culture where citizens are asked to reconcile such disparate and contradictory values?

## PR in the postmodern condition

In the postmodern condition, the messages created and distributed by a PR practitioner are inevitably received and interpreted in the context of a broad array of competing messages, perspectives, ideologies, viewpoints, information sources and even other PR practitioners representing competing interests. These messages are all made potentially available to receivers by their access to communication technology. In other words, the singular discourse of PR comes up against different ways of talking about the world. These different discourses are not always compatible, and yet all of them seem to have at least some authority. This context of competing information leads the receiver to question not only the content of the PR message, but, and more importantly, the message's legitimacy. After all, what makes the PR message more legitimate than any other? Why should one believe or act on the PR message when there are so many other competing messages that seem to carry as much authority?

Citizens of a postmodernist society find themselves in a position where universalizing meta-narratives are brought into question. In many respects, the experience of the postmodern condition is represented by Adso and William's experience of the labyrinth in Eco's (1983a) medieval library. Adso and William are faced with many books, and many discourses, some of which complement each other, and others that contradict each other. However, in the labyrinth, the scheme that unites all these texts, the meta-narrative, is either hidden or does not exist. There is no sense in which these texts are ordered, or which texts have more legitimacy, or which texts are true and which texts are fictions. This is also the experience of the subject in a postmodern condition, surrounded by texts and information coming at them from a myriad of sources and promoted by a myriad of interests. The subject is in a labyrinth of information detached from any meta-narrative with the legitimacy to order and make sense of this information. Instead of books in a library with no apparent order, the postmodern subjects finds themselves perpetually bombarded, given the chance, by 30-second sound bites, photo ops, and 140 character tweets. News reports become little stories punctuated by commercials. People graze television channels. Narrative is replaced by flow, connection is replaced by disconnection, and sequence is replaced by randomness (see Morley, 1996). For a theorist such as Jean Baudrillard (1988), people are seduced into a 'hyper-reality' that is constituted by pure floating images behind which there is nothing. In this all-embracing media environment, people have more information and less meaning. Jameson sees the postmodern in terms of a societal 'historical deafness' (1991: xi); that is, 'an age that has forgotten how to think historically' (1991: ix). For Jameson, the role of postmodern theory becomes an attempt to 'take the temperature of the age ... in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an "age," or zeitgeist or "system" or "current situation" any longer' (1991: xi).

In a postmodern labyrinth of surfaces and appearances, television, or even YouTube, takes over for the world as the place where real things happen. Politics become an adjunct

of show business. Rational critique is replaced by a state of mindless fascination. Judgments expressed by questions such as 'is that true?' or 'did that really happen?' become irrelevant. People are certainly given pleasure, but at the expense of giving up a realm of verifiable public truths. For example, the analysis of news content typically consists of looking at the coverage of real events, and then asking how objective or biased the coverage is. However, this presupposes that: (1) there is a real event; and (2) there is a separate representation of that event, the news story. However, in the post-modern condition, an event is only considered to be an event *if* it is covered on television.

Boorstin (1985) refers to such events as 'pseudo-events' and he explains PR's contribution to these phenomena through the telling of a story. The owners of a small hotel consult with a PR company and asks them the following question, 'How can we increase the hotel's prestige and improve business?' There are a number of direct things the owners might do, such as painting the rooms, hiring a new chef, or improving the hotel's amenities. The PR counselor proposes that the hotel management stage a celebration for the hotel's 30th anniversary. She suggests that a planning committee for this event be formed, and that this committee include among its members a prominent local lawyer, an influential preacher and a well-known celebrity. A banquet is planned at the hotel. A celebration is held, speeches are made, photographs are taken and the event is widely reported in the local and regional press.

The banquet is a classic example of a postmodern pseudo-event. The value of the event to its planners depends on it being photographed and reported in the media. It is the report of the event, rather than the event itself, that gives the event its force in the minds of potential customers of the hotel. As Boorstin notes, 'the power to make a reportable event is thus the power to make experience' (1985: 10).

Pseudo-events have a number of important characteristics. They are never spontaneous. Pseudo-events come about only because someone has planned, planted or incited them for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. Its success is measured by how widely the event is reported. The question 'Is it real?' is less important than the question 'Is it newsworthy?' Pseudo-events almost always overshadow spontaneous events because they are more dramatic. For example, a television debate between two presidential candidates can be planned in advance to make it more suspenseful and as such the event is made more vivid. The participants in the debate, or any pseudo-event, are selected for their dramatic interest rather than their intellectual expertise. As a result, pseudo-events are more intelligible and more reassuring. In a debate, even if one cannot discuss intelligently the qualifications of the candidates or the complicated issues, one can at least judge their performance on television. Knowledge of pseudo-events such as a presidential debate becomes the test of being informed. They provide the basis of a common discourse or water-cooler talk. They also spawn other pseudo-events, such as preview shows and post-debate shows with panels of chattering pundits and spin-doctors, and invitations for the public to participate in online polling provided by the news networks. As Kent et al. point out, Internet polling is not a simply an opportunity for the public to comment on the news, rather 'polls themselves have become news' (2006: 301). Preview shows, post-debate shows and the reporting of Internet polls are essentially pseudo-events whose function is to talk about other pseudo-events. In this way, the original pseudo-events can be constantly repeated and their impressions can be reinforced.



In a postmodern condition where subjects are immersed in a labyrinth of pseudo-events with no way to sort them out, most people simply choose to believe that knowledge is just a matter of opinion. They believe that on certain important questions, there is no way to know for sure. Issues such as global warming and climate change become a matter of perspective rather than a matter of truth or falsity. As a consequence, people tend to start believing those who have more access to the media, dominated by public relations practitioners and spin doctors, who provide grand narratives that seem to make sense to them. Or people seek out and choose to believe information and narratives that simply comply with their pre-existing worldview, and block out information that does not. With the widespread availability of search engines such as Google, people certainly have no problem getting access to a myriad of facts and information. The difficulty is sifting through all the information and making sense of it. The meta-narrative used to perform this function, but now the meta-narrative, if there is one, has no legitimacy or authority. Subjects become caught in a postmodern condition of incredulity and constant contradiction. On the one hand, people are brought up to believe that society has expertise and that one can see the products of that expertise in technology and other achievements. Yet, simultaneously, the same subjects inhabit a society that seems to be confused about its facts and positions and, in many senses, is lazy, unwilling to investigate and unable to arrive at a final conclusion about anything. The consequence of this condition is captured by Umberto Eco:

It doesn't matter what you say via the channels of mass communication; when the recipient is surrounded by a series of communications which reach him via various channels at the same time, in a given form, the nature of all this disparate information is of scant significance. The important thing is the gradual, uniform bombardment of information, where the different contents are leveled and lose their differences. (1986: 136)

And further:

Liberated from the contents of communication, the addressee of the messages of the mass media receives only a global ideological lesson, the call to narcotic passiveness. (1986: 136-7)

All this seems very pessimistic, but there is another side to this incredulity towards meta-narratives in the postmodern condition. The receiver of any given message, even though they are lost in the postmodern labyrinth, always has the freedom to read the message in their own way, and in ways not intended by the sender. This is a crucial insight. As a rule, politicians, educators and corporate communicators believe that to control the power of the media they must control two key factors in the chain – the source and the channel. By doing this, the message creators believe they can control the message. Alas, according to Eco (1986), they can only control an empty form that each addressee will fill with meanings provided by their own cultural models. It is no use controlling the source and the channel: 'The battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where communication originates, but where it arrives' (Eco, 1986: 142).



The postmodern condition allows great latitude for the interpretation of messages, both by groups and individuals. Every reader has the potential to bring something different to every message: different backgrounds, education, motives, motivation, and so on. When a message is transmitted to a wide or even global audience, these inevitable differences in background, culture and knowledge will lead to a number of different readings of the message even though the actual words and sentences remain the same for all readers. As Eco describes, this variety is the very nature of the reading experience: 'When a text is produced not for a single addressee but for a community of readers – the author knows that he or she will be interpreted not according to his or her intentions but according to a complex strategy of interactions which also involve the readers' (1992: 67). Although the sender of the message may intend to convey certain themes and ideas, in the last analysis the sender has no real control as to how these words will come to be read and used. Eco has noted 'the text is there, and produces its own effects' (1983b: 7). What a text means, the content it attempts to convey, is not simply contained in its words or in the intentions of its author. As Eco points out, 'the text's intention is not displayed by the textual surface ... One has to decide to 'see' it. It is possible to speak of the text's intention only as a result of a conjunction on the part of the reader' (1992: 64). In order for a reader to understand the text and the intentions that lie behind the words, the reader must make conjectures, hypotheses, and educated guesses. It is the interaction of these conjectures and the text that produces the meanings that are derived. How a text combines with a reader's personal and cultural encyclopedia of knowledge forms the heart of Eco's semiotic problematic.

Like Eco, Foucault notes of his own writings that 'the effects of the book might land in unexpected places and form shapes that I had never thought of' (1988b: 333–4). In his foreword to *The Order of Things* (1970), Foucault writes: 'This foreword should perhaps be headed "Directions for Use." Not because I feel that the reader cannot be trusted – he is, of course, free to make what he will of the book he has been kind enough to read. What right have I, then, to suggest that it should be used in one way rather than another?' (1970: ix).

In the postmodern condition, the message and the sign become sites of ideological struggle. Cultural texts are not inscribed with meaning, guaranteed by the intentions of the sender. Meaning has to be expressed, but it is always expressed in a specific context, a specific historical moment, within a specific discourse. As Storey explains, 'A text or practice or event is not the issuing source of meaning, but a site where the articulation of meaning – variable meaning(s) – can take place' (1996: 4). Because different meanings can be ascribed to the same text or practice or event, meaning is always a potential site of conflict. Culture is a terrain of incorporation and resistance, a site where hegemony is won or lost.

## Some conclusions

The plurality of meanings and interpretations is a hallmark of postmodernism, and brings us back to Holtzhausen and her claim that dominant understandings of PR remain fixed in 'management practices based on modernist principles of command and control' (2000: 93). There are no simple prescriptive recommendations to connect the modernist principles of command and control with the postmodernist expectations of contemporary

publics. One cannot generate a list of tips, techniques and strategies that will enable the PR practitioner to be more effective. Indeed, the assumption of effectiveness is another hallmark of the modernist outlook. The notion that effective communication is good communication is a part of a dominant meta-narrative that needs to be challenged rather than enabled. This conclusion contradicts that of Elizabeth Toth who argued that 'post-modernism must have "cash value" for modern public relations' (2002: 243). She says: 'I have an affinity for postmodern thought. But, I would feel uncomfortable if it didn't help the field become more effective' (2002: 243). Others have attempted to explore how a postmodern frame might make PR practice more effective (see Marsh, 2008; Tyler, 2005). Even Holtzhausen argues that 'postmodern theories can help public relations scholars and practitioners understand their increasingly diverse society and come up with solutions to some of the problems they face' (2000: 95).

But, once again, the frame of effectiveness is part of a prevailing meta-narrative that holds contemporary PR together. PR is effective if it generates responses to messages that are in the interests of its senders. The radical move that a postmodern treatment of PR must make is a complete break with the goals and practices of practitioners. Dozier and Lauzen write that 'As an intellectual discipline or domain matures, the professional agenda should play a declining role in defining and setting the agenda for the intellectual domain' (2000: 20) and that 'The public relations practitioner is inadequately trained and ill-situated to prescribe the scholarly agenda in the intellectual domain of public relations' (2000: 20). A postmodern treatment of PR must transcend the interests of the practitioner in order to situate those interests in the meta-narratives that structure social and cultural environments in which PR plays its role. A postmodern treatment of PR must self-reflectively stop privileging the notion that PR is about the management of communication and the search for best practices that inevitably lead to some idealized best solution. The goal of postmodernism is *not* to make PR campaigns more effective. It is to open up incredulity toward the meta-narratives of social science, capitalism and communication that uses the notion of effectiveness as a central claim. Recent scholarship in PR is moving in this direction, as exemplified by the collections of Heath et al. (2009) and Ihlen et al. (2009). One must, following Cheney and Christensen, see PR as a 'contested disciplinary and interdisciplinary terrain' (2001: 167).

It is not suggested here that a postmodernist perspective of PR is correct or superior to an understanding of PR based on modernist principles of command, control and effectiveness. The force and vitality of postmodernism lies in its challenge to the existing worldview of a modernist regime of PR. Postmodernism should not be seen as simply another method that is somehow complementary to modernism in its constant striving for effectiveness. Postmodernism is not another tool to be employed in the PR practitioner's toolbox. It is not another chapter in a 'Perspectives of Public Relations' textbook. Indeed, to ask what postmodernism can say about PR is already a loaded and ultimately misleading question because one is implicitly buying into the assumption that PR exists as an autonomous entity that can be objectively studied. Asking what postmodernism can say about PR also implies that a postmodern perspective can somehow shed further light on this reality. As was shown in the discussion of science earlier, by asking that question, one is also implicitly adopting a modernist notion of reality that postmodernism seeks to question.

Any discussion of postmodernism with respect to PR is intended to create doubt in the pervasive belief in the meta-narrative of modernity. To discuss postmodernism as a philosophy and method is to discuss a discursive world very different from one dominated by notions of command, control and effectiveness. To understand this world, one must agree to abide by the rules of the new world that this new discourse makes possible, and to give up the real world understandings provided by previously dominant meta-narratives. This claim is made more difficult by a natural and persistent tendency to understand new ideas in terms of old ways. It is important to realize that postmodernism is not just a revision or modification of old ways of doing PR, but a radical reconsideration of the discourses that make those old ways possible. It is not just an additional theory inserted into an existing field, but a thoroughgoing alternative to it. The 'cash value' of postmodernism advocated by Toth (2002) and Marsh (2008) may not be that postmodernism makes PR more effective, but rather that it exposes effectiveness as a viable way of understanding PR at all, and promotes an appreciation for the 'postmodernist expectations of those people who constitute the organization's multicultural, multiethnic, and gendered internal and external publics' (Holtzhausen, 2000: 93). Such an appreciation only comes by fully embracing the incredulity of meta-narratives proposed by Lyotard.

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