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## The Role of Public Relations in Deliberative Systems

### Abstract

This article reframes public relations' contribution to democracy in light of the recent turn to deliberative systems in democratic theory. I consider the problematic that public relations poses to normative models of deliberative democracy, and how that problematic has been addressed in public relations theory thus far. I suggest that deliberative systems provides a more robust basis for theorising public relations' role in deliberation and propose an analytical approach for understanding the complex and sometimes contradictory role of public relations in deliberative democracy. The framework provides a starting point for locating public relations' engagement in deliberative systems and evaluating its effects.

Keywords: public relations, organizational communication, deliberation, deliberative systems, democracy

### **The Role of Public Relations in Deliberative Systems**

The role of public relations in deliberative democracy has long been a focus of debate. Scholarly definitions of public relations emphasise its potentially positive influence, including its function as a means of exchanging ideas, as in ‘the communication and exchange of ideas to facilitate change’ (L’Etang, 2008, p. 18); or its ability to ‘create (and re-create) the conditions that enact civil society’ (Taylor, 2010, p. 7); or to create and sustain connections between individuals and groups, as in ‘the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of stakeholder and organizational relationships’ (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 26). However, in practice, public relations is most widely used as a strategic tool for corporates and governments to realise self-interest and advantage in competitive environments – contexts that do not necessarily lend themselves to democratic engagement (Moloney, 2006). Practitioners tend to frame this activity in terms of reputation management through communication: the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the UK, for example, argues that ‘in today’s competitive market, reputation can be a company’s biggest asset’ and defines public relations as ‘the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour’ (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2013); other industry associations take a similar approach (see, e.g. Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2015; Public Relations Society of America, 2015; Public Relations Society of India, 2015)

The instrumental approach to public relations poses a problem for understanding it as a positive force in democratic deliberation. Deliberative theorists emphasise the importance of rational, reasonable, open and inclusive debates among citizens to reaching legitimate decisions about how society should be governed (Chambers, 2012; Dryzek, 2000). These requirements distinguish deliberation from being ‘mere talk’ and from distortion through manipulation or coercion (Parkinson, 2012; Schudson, 1997). They are secured through a

number of normative conditions including the need to set aside vested interests, to prioritise rational argument and to include all those affected by the issue under discussion (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010; Habermas, 1996; Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2010). Such conditions inevitably lead to critiques of public relations, given that the motivation to use it is usually associated with some form of organizational self-interest (e.g. improving reputation, relationships or sales), and that emotional appeals are widely used in campaigns alongside, or instead of, rational argument. Combined with evidence of poor public relations practice, the profession is easily framed as the cause of various pathologies of deliberation (Bohman, 2000; Stokes, 1998): government communicators may be seen to mislead the public about policy decisions; issues management campaigns may mislead policymakers about public opinion; and media relations practitioners may manipulate the media agenda such that media discourses represent ‘pseudo-preferences’ of the public rather than real ones. More generally, the profession could be accused of engaging in ‘plebiscitary rhetoric’ (Chambers, 2009, p. 328), where the aim is to win the argument and gain power rather than reflexively engage with other actors in order to pursue a legitimate consensus.

Attempts to reclaim the place of public relations in democracy emphasise its ability to generate social capital that connects individuals, groups and organizations, its value to activist groups, and the normative importance of dialogue, rather than demagoguery, to public relations. In this article, I suggest that these interventions are useful ways of highlighting the variety of forms and effects that public relations take in the context of deliberative democracy, but do not address the more fundamental problem of public relations’ failure to meet normative conditions for deliberative engagement. Instead, I argue that the recently developed theory of deliberative systems provides a more appropriate framework for explaining public relations’ deliberative role. My argument contributes to existing discussions about public relations’ democratic contribution. It also extends

deliberative democratic theory by making more explicit the role of organizations as deliberative actors. In deliberative theory, detailed analysis of the work of experts (often technical or scientific, and likely to be formally associated with an organization), interest groups, social movements and for-profit organizations is largely glossed over in favour of a focus on the division of labour that characterizes the deliberative process (Bohman, 2000; O'Neill, 2002). What channels of communication are used, how they are managed, and how they contribute to deliberation, remains an important, but under-researched area of deliberative theory (Parkinson, 2012).

I first review how the relationship between public relations and democracy has been theorised, reflecting on these arguments in light of normative conditions for deliberative democracy. I then introduce deliberative systems theory and consider the advantages it offers for understanding public relations' role. Finally, I propose an analytical approach that provides a theoretical and empirical basis for understanding and evaluating public relations' role in deliberative democracy.

### **Democratic, Deliberative Public Relations?**

Understanding the problem posed by public relations to deliberation requires a brief review of the normative conditions for deliberative engagements. They are difficult to realise in practice, and arguably best interpreted as an ideal form of democratic arrangement towards which society might strive. Societal debates may then be understood as more or less deliberative, depending on the degree to which the conditions are met (Cohen, 1989; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dryzek, 2000; Habermas, 1996).

Deliberation takes place in circumstances of disagreement over matters about which a decision must be reached (Thompson, 2008). In deliberative democracy, the normative focus of deliberation is policy-related, dealing with matters about how society should be organized and governed. Ideally, all those who are affected by such matters should be included in the

deliberation, since the more inclusive the process, the more legitimate is the final decision (Cohen, 1989). Habermas conceived of deliberation as taking place in the public sphere, an arena where ‘structures of undamaged intersubjectivity found in non-distorted communication’ prevail (Habermas, 1996, p. 148). There should be equal access and status for all those entitled to participate, arguments should lead to a rational consensus, based on reason rather than emotion, and participants should set aside their own interests in favour of the common good (Cohen, 1989). While these conditions ensure that deliberation reaches an appropriate quality threshold, it can only be effective if there is a means by which the content and results of debates are communicated to policymakers and have some kind of impact (Chambers, 2012; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006). Publicity has a normative role as a means by which the content of deliberation is communicated across society, encouraging engagement from wider audiences and ensuring policymakers understand and remain accountable to public opinion (Dryzek, 2009; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996).

Public relations’ supportive role for democracy has been embedded in justifications for public relations work since it first emerged (Heath, Waymer, & Palenchar, 2013), but certain aspects nonetheless pose particular problems in light of these normative conditions. These are: the fact that self-interest, rather than the common good, is its driving force; the fact that campaigns encompass a wide range of types of discourse, not only rational argument; and the fact that public relations tends to be used most widely by already dominant groups in society, further increasing their power and distorting debates in favour of their interests. None of the criticisms are easily addressed, not least because of the plentiful evidence of their validity (see, e.g. GM Watch, 2015; Miller & Dinan, 2000, 2007; Pitcher, 2003). The implicit response in public relations scholarship is to suggest that public relations’ contribution to democracy is more complex than its ability to adhere to deliberative norms.

Perhaps the most obvious specialist areas of public relations to consider in the context of democracy are government communication, public affairs and lobbying. In government communication, practitioners are involved a range of activities, from party-specific communication to electoral campaigns and policy dissemination (Roper, 2005a). Practitioners use discourse to (re)position a party or government and its policies in ways that preserve its unique identity (Motion & Leitch, 1996; Roper, 2005a; Saxer, 1993). In the context of electoral campaigns, public relations materials have been found to influence both the media and the public agenda in ways that reflect candidates' respective positions, identities and the power of their arguments (Kiouisis, Mitrook, & Seltzer, 2006) and also affect attitudes towards politicians (Hwang, 2013). In contrast, lobbying and public affairs work originates outside government and helps organizations influence policymakers (Cronin, 2013; Davidson, 2014; Davis, 2002; Haug & Koppang, 1997; Lerbinger, 2006; Somerville & Ramsey, 2012; Wise, 2007). Public affairs campaigns aim to attain 'sufficient power to enable an organization to achieve preferred outcomes in the political arena and to forge and maintain a socio-political environment favourable to it' (Lerbinger, 2006, p. 5). They can be targeted at interest groups, media and government officials relevant to an issue. Lobbying, in contrast, is advocacy 'directed at government/legislators and carried out by actors within or on behalf of a group or organization' (Somerville & Ramsey, 2012, p. 47), frequently conducted away from the public eye.

From a normative perspective, these types of public relations contribute to deliberation by ensuring that adequate information about government practice and policy is available for publics to make informed choices about their political support and participation. They may generate trust between a government and its citizens so that participation in democratic processes is encouraged (Hong, Park, Lee, & Park, 2012), may ensure that activists and third sector organizations have an important influence on policy alongside

corporates, bolstering or contesting the decisions of government officials and politicians (Courtright & Smudde, 2007; Henderson, 2005; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Smith & Ferguson, 2013). However, critics question the balance struck by public relations practitioners between keeping publics informed about policy and managing information in ways that reduce transparency (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Davis, 2002, 2007; McNair, 2004). For example, in what Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) have called the 'third age' of political communication, the 'mediatisation of politics' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) means that the presentation of policy and politicians can be driven more by the needs of the media agenda than by a concern for political substance, producing an emphasis on marketing policies and politicians, and monitoring and managing public opinion (Moloney, 2006). The quality of public debates is correspondingly weaker, because matters of public concern are ignored (Phillis, 2004; Rice & Somerville, 2013).

Critics also argue that lobbying presents a danger to democracy because it creates elite networks of decision-makers that exclude the general populace (Crouch, 2004; Davis, 2002, 2003, 2007; Miller, 2005; Moloney, 2006). The combination of exclusivity and secrecy constrains the scope of deliberation about matters of public interest: if the public are not aware of the arguments being proposed to policymakers, they have no opportunity to present a counter-argument, nor to influence how lobbyists' arguments might be received. The problem is exacerbated by the widespread use of front groups, where corporates secretly fund and resource activist groups that claim to be acting on behalf of community interests, but whose lobbying and public affairs work in fact serves their 'silent partner' (Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006).

Aside from the role of public relations in government and policymaking, some scholars have argued that public relations' contribution to democracy is understood best in terms of its influence on the quality of communication in wider society. They cast



organizations as societal actors, rather than profit-driven entities; instrumentality is mitigated by reframing their activities as a positive contribution to deliberation and community life (Auger, 2013; Grunig, 2000). Starck and Kruckeberg (2001, p. 59; Valentini, Kruckeberg, & Starck, 2012), for example, argue for a communitarian perspective of public relations where organizations recognize society as the ‘greatest stakeholder’, and base their communication with audiences on mutual respect and openness to change. Heath (2006) has argued for public relations to take the lead in creating a ‘fully-functioning society’ characterized by robust and ethical debate, while Willis (2012) suggests treating stakeholder relationships as a ‘social commons’ where engagement is based on ‘social consensus, equity, moral legitimacy and transparency in decision-making’ (p. 118).

Reframing organizations as societal actors opens up a positive role for public relations in civil society, understood as a space that mediates between private and public spheres and where ‘individuals and groups are free to form organisations that function independently and that can mediate between citizens and the state’ (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p. 190; Habermas, 1996). Taylor (2010, p. 7) interprets it as ‘a communicative process grounded in information, communication and relationships’. Correspondingly, public relations is an essential component of civil society because of its normative relationship-building role (Taylor, 2000). Taylor and Doerfel (2005, p. 122) go so far as to argue that ‘[p]ublic relations, with its ability to create, maintain, and change relationships is at the nexus of civil society development’. A number of authors have connected this with the concept of social capital, or the development of networks between organizations and their audiences that facilitate social cohesion (Ihlen, 2005; Kennan & Hazelton, 2006; Sommerfeldt, 2013a, 2013b; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Verhoeven, 2008; Willis, 2012).

The focus on public relations in civil society is complemented by arguments about its value to the public sphere. Hiebert (2005, p. 3) claims that the ‘only possible solution [for

ensuring fair access to the public sphere] is public relations, not in terms of spin or propaganda but in terms of developing real public relationships in the public sphere.’ Because organizations engage as social actors in debates (Ihlen & Van Ruler, 2009; Saxer, 1993) public relations is interpreted as societal communication, ‘concerned with issues and values that are considered publicly relevant, which means relating to the public sphere’ (Jensen, 2001, p. 134). Finally, the rhetorical and dialogic schools of public relations theory provide normative justifications for public relations’ positive influence on public debate, by ensuring organizations focus on honesty, quality of argument and providing adequate evidence for their position. Dialogic communication, grounded in mutuality, empathy, propinquity, commitment and an acceptance of risk, is central to this process (Day, Dong, & Robins, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Pieczka, 2011). The suggestion is that high quality arguments presented by ethical organizations can contribute to a healthy public sphere where matters of public interest are negotiated in a process of genuine engagement (Heath et al., 2013). The result is a form of institutionalized democracy that brings different groups closer together in a more ‘fully-functioning society’ (Heath, 2001, 2006).

These arguments provide an important rationale for public relations’ positive influence on democracy, and empirical research on the use of public relations as a tool for engagement suggests that it can strengthen civil society in some contexts, particularly in conflict and post-conflict societies (Henderson, 2005; Hon, 1997; Somerville & Aroussi, 2013; Somerville & Kirby, 2012; Taylor, 2000; Toledano & McKie, 2013). Nonetheless, in light of normative parameters for deliberation, important flaws in the arguments remain. First, the self-interest that drives public relations means it must be understood as a form of strategic, rather than communicative action (Roper, 2005b). Organizations are most likely to ‘speak well’ and engage with societal concerns if it is in their interest to do so. This means that the public interest is rarely a priority for practitioners, and is always in danger of being

sacrificed on the altar of organizational survival. Even civil society arguments in favour of public relations do not require organizations to prioritise societal interests. A campaign may improve the quality of civil society, but it also increases the likelihood that the organization will achieve its goals and gain a stronger position in networks that matter to its success (Ihlen, 2005; Sommerfeldt, 2013b). Second, the strategic segmentation of publics involved in targeting communication campaigns works against openness and inclusiveness in democratic debates, fragmenting audiences so that their ability to formulate a collective voice is compromised (Leitch & Motion, 2010; Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Third, normative deliberative conditions exclude pathos and ethos – which underpin much public relations work – from deliberation, since they contravene the condition of rational argumentation on which the quality of public debate depends. Finally, the exploitation of public relations by powerful institutions tends to entrench, rather than limit, their influence on societal governance. Stories abound of PR campaigns that reframe disasters as opportunities, shut down opposition by corporate activities; falsify earnings; or offer appeasement to corporate victims with one hand while continuing their anti-social activities with the other (Center for Media and Democracy, 2015; Lobbywatch, 2015).

As a whole, arguments in favour of public relations' contribution to democracy are weak when viewed in light of normative deliberative conditions. They require both unreasonable optimism and selective attention from their adherents. One must live in hope that organizations will focus on building relationships that will enhance the fabric of civil society, or will demonstrate concern for honesty, transparency and high-quality argument. One must ignore the fact that such circumstances are less common than one might like, and that the vast majority of public relations is carried out to serve vested commercial and political interests such that the ability of the wider public to have an effective voice in debates about the public interest is reduced (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Fitzpatrick & Palenchar, 2006;

Simmons & Walsh, 2010; Weaver, Motion, & Roper, 2006). In sum, scholars in favour of public relations' role in democracy focus on its importance as a means of disseminating information, prompting discussion and engaging with audiences, but do not connect this with the kinds of deliberative conditions that enhance democracy, and thus leave their position vulnerable to critique.

There is, however, a problem with the general criticisms of public relations' role in society listed above, insofar as they fail to distinguish important differences in practice. The organizations public relations represents vary, but critics treat awareness-raising campaigns, lobbying and public affairs work by NGOs, charities and grassroots campaigners as one with the many examples of undemocratic public relations (Moloney, 2004). All government communication is regarded with suspicion, even if some does constitute a genuine attempt to engage and inform the populace. In addition, critics tend to ignore the agency of the audience, treating them as passive receivers of corrupt public relations and unable to look beyond the spin they are fed. This is surely an unfair representation of today's media-savvy, public relations-aware audiences, who can – and frequently do - explore many sources of information other than official public relations channels (e.g. social media, activist blogs) (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). Finally, dismissing public relations is normatively problematic, given the importance of publicity to deliberation as a means of disseminating ideas and arguments. Publicity must be actively generated by using media, events, social media and other forms of communication to reach relevant audiences, secure their attention and engage them in debate. Public relations is an important tool through which organizations of all kinds generate publicity for their position using a wide range of tools, as part of their participation in societal debates (Ashra, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2010; Demetrious, 2013); as such it is an indispensable element in the complex processes of production, circulation and uptake of deliberative debates.

A robust analysis of public relations' deliberative role has to make sense of these realities. In the next section, I suggest that the recent turn towards deliberative systems in democratic theory offers space for thinking differently, and in a more defensible way, about PR's contribution to deliberative democracy.

### **Deliberative Systems**

Scholars have begun to explore the idea of deliberative systems as a way of understanding how deliberation unfolds across society (Mansbridge et al., 2012). They build on the recognition that deliberation takes place on two levels: at the micro-level, actors come together in relatively small-scale and localized arenas to deliberate on a particular issue (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Grönlund, Bächtiger, & Setälä, 2014; Hendriks, 2006a; Marques & Maia, 2010; Munshi, Kurian, Morrison, & Morrison, 2014; Parkinson, 2006). At the macro-level, public debates circulate, evolve and change across public spheres (Mansbridge, 1999; Parkinson, 2004) Deliberative systems theory engages with the ways these different levels and forms of deliberation are connected, working together to produce a (more or less) deliberative democracy.

Deliberative systems are dynamic decision-making arenas that address societal decisions in an 'emergent' way (Bohman, 2012; Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 8). They include formal and informal discursive arenas, from everyday talk (Mansbridge, 1999) to deliberative fora explicitly set up to bring different parties together to debate a particular issue (Hendriks, 2006b; Marques & Maia, 2010; Parkinson, 2004). Kurian, Munshi and Bartlett (2014) suggest that deliberation is a dialectical process, where actors contest each other's positions in relation to the 'constitutional dialectics' of a particular matter (e.g. public/private or state/non-state in the context of sustainable citizenship), in the process discovering not only areas of conflict, but also shared values that might form the basis for agreement (Jacobs et al., 2010). Over time, the continuous interactions between deliberative actors in a system produce

changes in acceptable societal values and behaviours, based on the discourses that develop within and circulate across the system (Dryzek, 2010; Mansbridge et al., 2012).

Dryzek (2009, pp. 1385-6) suggests there are five elements in any deliberative system. Public spaces for deliberation are inclusive and take a variety of forms, including the abstract space of the media, institutionally defined spaces such as activist groups or social movements, and locations where discussion takes place, such as cafes, bars and classrooms. Empowered spaces are locations where institutional actors deliberate to produce collective decisions, such as courts, legislative bodies, or stakeholder networks brought together to address a specific matter. Transmission is the means by which deliberation in public space influences deliberation in empowered space, and may be cultural, relational or communicative. Accountability is the degree to which empowered space is accountable to public space such that the legitimacy of decisions made may be assessed. Finally, decisiveness relates to the influence that deliberation has on collective decisions.

Not every interaction in a deliberative system is assumed to demonstrate ideal characteristics. Goodin (2005), for example, proposes the idea of distributed deliberation, where 'the component deliberative virtues are on display sequentially, over the course of [...] staged deliberation, rather than continuously and simultaneously present' (p. 186; see also Bächtiger, Niemeyer, Neblo, Steiner, & Marco, 2010). Instead, the focus is on the ways in which the imperfections in individual deliberative encounters are balanced across the system such that a 'more deliberative democracy' can be achieved (Coleman and Blumler, 2009, p. 38). Certain criteria for deliberative communication remain: it must be respectful of others, non-coercive, capable of connecting the particular to the general and encourage others to reflect on their own positions (Dryzek, 2000, p. 167). Communication must also be reciprocal, expressed in terms that others can accept (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). Dryzek (2009) argues that the combination of these attributes can be used to assess the

‘authenticity’ of the deliberative system. A deliberative system must also be sensitive to a wide range of inputs from citizens, including but not limited to rational argument (Parkinson, 2012) – this is its level of ‘inclusiveness’, or the ‘range of interests and discourses present in a political setting’ (Dryzek, 2009, p. 1382). Finally, Dryzek (2009) argues that deliberation must be consequential, with an impact on decision-making (Bohman, 2012). The quality of a deliberative system may be measured in terms of its deliberative capacity – the degree to which it is authentic, inclusive and consequential (Dryzek, 2009). The higher the capacity, the closer is the system to realising ideal conditions for deliberation, and the more likely it is that actors will engage effectively with each other, allowing mutual recognition to emerge between individuals and groups.

Deliberative systems theory allows the criticisms of public relations listed above to be addressed without proposing a normative model that has limited empirical validity. First, it positions self-interest as a valid motivation for deliberative participation. Deliberative systems theorists recognize that self-interest is essential if a deliberative process is to properly clarify the interests and preferences relevant to an issue: ‘If members of the group can speak only as “we” and not as “I,” neither they nor the other participants may be able to discover what is really at stake and forge integrated solutions’ (Mansbridge et al., 2010, p. 73). In some cases, such as issue-specific interest groups, their input into debates ensures that important sources of expertise are included in deliberation and improve the basis of argumentation (Bohman, 2000; Parkinson, 2004). The critical issue for deliberative systems is the degree to which partisan positions are contested, such that the overall quality of deliberation is preserved (Hendriks, 2002; Mansbridge et al., 2012).

Second, the focus on a system of deliberation, rather than on individual deliberative engagements, accommodates the variability of public relations work and places that work in a broader and more complex context, recognising how public relations can be an important

resource deployed by actors on all sides of a debate, including those who are trying to resist dominance. It also allows for the possibility that the exclusivity prompted by segmentation of publics in one arena might be countered by an alternative segmentation of publics in another, which admits a different set of participants to the deliberative process.

Finally, deliberative systems theory expands the types of discourse permitted in deliberation: alongside rationality, rhetoric, storytelling and testimony can play a crucial role as communicative styles that express the identities and positions of the different groups involved in deliberation, thereby improving representation (Bohman, 2012; Chambers, 2009; Mansbridge, 2003; Niemeyer, 2010; O'Neill, 2002). This allows a wide range of public relations tactics to be included in deliberation, including those forms of pathos and ethos identified in rhetorical models of public relations (Heath, 2001; Ihlen, 2011; Taylor, 2011). In fact, Dryzek (2010) suggests that rhetorical theory has always emphasized the importance of pathos and ethos alongside logos, as fundamental to effective argumentation and argues that rhetorical communication is particularly important to deliberation because it encourages audiences to reflect on their position, sowing the seeds of persuasion and enabling speakers to reach others whose positions may be far removed from their own.

In summary, using deliberative systems as a framework for understanding public relations' role in deliberative democracy offers two significant advantages. First, it accommodates the variability in practice that is overlooked in existing arguments for and against its influence on democracy. Second, some of public relations' inherent characteristics (self-interest, the use of non-rational argumentation and the segmentation of audiences) that are problematic if viewed in the context of individual deliberative engagements, are recognized as inherent to deliberative systems. Indeed, some deliberative theorists implicitly acknowledge the role of public relations in deliberation, noting that communication in deliberative systems 'passes through various expert communicators who package exchanges



and discussions for audiences who have little opportunity to contribute' (Bohman, 2000, p. 48).

This general acknowledgement notwithstanding, two questions need to be addressed to understand how deliberative systems help us understand public relations' role in deliberation. First, where does public relations intervene in a deliberative system? And second, what effect does it have on the quality of deliberation? These questions are the focus for the rest of this article.

### **Locating Public Relations in Deliberative Systems**

Dryzek's (2009) deconstruction of deliberative systems into five elements is a useful starting point. In empowered space, public relations is visible as a function that helps organizations manage their engagement with other actors who debate an issue in a formally constructed space, such as lobbying meetings or government consultations. Practitioners (perhaps in their roles as lobbyists, public affairs managers or government communicators) are likely to be involved in the development of briefs, scripts or speeches that help organizations communicate their position, respond to challenges, and challenge others within a selective group of decision makers. In public space, public relations prompts deliberation insofar as organizations use it to provide different types of information that can help citizens 'form their opinions and come to their policy preferences' (Chambers, 2009, p. 333). For example, campaigns aimed at limiting regulation in the financial industry may take the form of banks promoting their community engagement and sponsorship activities to customers, local MPs and activist groups through traditional and social media, online and at community events. The campaigns would influence public debate about the merits of regulation by creating positive exposure for the banks that could lead citizens to think of them in a more generous light, deflecting attention from their historical misdemeanours. Equally, NGOs trying to raise awareness of the importance of people-trafficking may use a mobile media

campaign, start a petition on Avaaz, and set up a website where anyone can find out more information about trafficking in their local area. This kind of campaign could generate discussions about the prevalence of the problem at a local, regional and national level and lead to greater public pressure for regulation and protection of victims.

Public relations is an important mechanism for transmission. It ensures debates circulate in deliberative systems both within empowered and public spaces, as well as between the two spaces. For example, organizations engaging in a deliberative forum may use public relations to generate publicity about that engagement as a way of reinforcing their commitment to key stakeholders and the community (Hendriks, 2006b). They may place stories on a website, arrange an exclusive interview with a favoured media outlet; or tweet about the discussions in the forum. While the deliberation itself takes place in 'empowered space' (the forum where company representatives join others in discussion), public relations helps ensure the same arguments circulate in public spaces, prompting other forms of deliberation, from everyday talk to debates in the media. It can also enhance accountability in deliberative systems, by raising issues that the public feel policymakers should address, as well as challenging the decisions that they come to about important societal issues.

Public relations can enhance two other important dimensions of an authentic deliberative system: pluralism and inclusiveness. Effective deliberation depends upon pluralism, or the availability of a wide enough range of interest groups with specialized knowledge about a policy domain, such that no single group can dominate deliberative engagements and decisions are based on the broadest possible set of relevant information (Christiano, 2012). Pluralism is linked to inclusiveness, or the breadth of interests and discourses represented in deliberation (Dryzek, 2009). Public relations is instrumental in securing both pluralism and inclusiveness, because it is a tool through which both dominant and marginalized groups can make their voices heard in debates that concern them. For

example, while profit-oriented organizations use public relations to justify their perspectives on matters of policy and engage more effectively with citizens and stakeholders (Bourne, 2013; Davis, 2007; Livesey & Kearns, 2002; Roper, 2011), activists and interest groups use a wide range of communication strategies to raise awareness of issues, challenge corporate power, translate expertise into accessible messages for a wider audience, persuade audiences of their own legitimacy, and influence policymakers both directly and via shifts in public opinion (Demetrious, 2013; Heath & Waymer, 2009; Straughan, 2004; Urbaniti & Warren, 2008). The Bhopal Medical Appeal (<http://bhopal.org>), for example, raises awareness of the lasting effects of the Union Carbide disaster in 1984, when thousands died from a leak of poisonous gas at the Union Carbide plant; in articulating the case for ongoing support for the community, they challenge the corporate presentation of the disaster as an historical event, and its lack of investment in any further clean-up of the site or compensation for victims. In the process, such groups represent marginalized communities in deliberation, whose communicative status is weak and whose views may otherwise be overwhelmed by other dominant voices (Bohman, 2012; Moloney, 2006). For example, Amnesty International makes public the perspectives of communities and incarcerated individuals whose own governments are attempting to silence them. In making these voices heard, they ‘call constituencies into being [...] such that citizens identify and engage with different representatives on different topics in different contexts’ (Parkinson, 2012, p. 163). Public relations used in this way can prompt national and international debates and policy change on matters ranging from human rights, to environmental degradation and violence against women (Mynster & Edwards, 2014; Peruzzo, 2009; Somerville & Aroussi, 2013).

### **The Effects of PR on Deliberative Capacity**

In the context of deliberative systems, the effect of public relations on the quality of deliberation is most logically framed in terms of its effects on deliberative capacity, or the

degree to which a system is authentic, inclusive and consequential. This will vary depending on the ontological level of analysis, because public relations' presence in deliberative systems manifests on three levels. At the campaign level, public relations strategies and tactics are implemented in the context of a specific campaign and for a particular purpose. At the issue level, public relations facilitates deliberation across a range of organizations in relation to a specific issue. At the system level, the aggregate of public relations activities across multiple issues and campaigns influences the overall balance of power between different actors engaged in deliberation. In this section, I consider how the three dimensions of deliberative capacity might be assessed at each level.

**The campaign level.** To avoid the fallacy that 'anything goes' in deliberation (Bächtiger et al., 2010) we must consider what conditions need to prevail for public relations campaigns to constitute a deliberative intervention. Dryzek (2000) provides helpful parameters here that provide the basis for two conditions to assess the deliberative quality of a public relations campaign. First, he argues that deliberative discourses must deal with matters of public interest. Correspondingly, campaigns that claim to be deliberative must demonstrate a link between the particular position of the advocate and a relevant generalizable interest. Speaking only in one's own interest does not constitute a contribution to deliberation. I term this condition the 'condition of generalizable interests'. The National Rifle Association in the USA, for example, links its arguments for gun ownership to constitutional rights and individual freedom (see [home.nra.org](http://home.nra.org)).

Second, Dryzek (2000) argues that democratic deliberative discourses must be both inclusive and reflexive, 'engaged by a broad variety of competent actors under unconstrained conditions' (p. 77). Participants must give their opponents the space to speak, treat them with respect, and be open to changing their own position if necessary. Correspondingly, campaigns that claim to be deliberative must be open to and respectful of other perspectives -

including the discourses of geographically or symbolically distant groups that may not be immediately relevant to an organization, but are nonetheless affected by its work. I term this condition the ‘condition of genuine engagement’. On this criteria, the NRA may fail since its communication tends to dismiss counter-arguments, rather than treat them seriously and engage in debate.

The conditions of generalizable interests and genuine engagement can be used to assess public relations’ contribution to the authenticity and inclusiveness of a deliberative system, because they allow us to translate these conditions into the context of public relations work, by asking specific questions that can guide empirical investigations at the campaign level: does the campaign clearly connect specific organizational interests to a generalizable interest? Are those generalizable interests accepted or contested by other parties in the deliberative engagement, and how strong is their defence? Are opposing voices treated as adversaries rather than antagonists (Mouffe, 1999), with respect and giving them room to speak? Are audiences consulted and their views fed back to the organization? Are response mechanisms built into the communicative tools used in the campaign? Is the organization communicating to all audiences affected by the issue at hand, including those who are geographically distant or less immediately useful to the organization’s purpose? Does the organization respond to the all challenges to its position, or only to a select few?

**The issue level.** At the issue-specific level, public relations should be understood as a set of tools through which different groups engage in deliberation about a matter that affects their lives. To understand its contribution to deliberative capacity at this level, we can turn to Dryzek’s (2000) requirement that pluralism be preserved by ensuring a wide range of discourses is included in deliberation, and say that public relations contributes to deliberation to the extent that it facilitates participation in specific debates for the widest possible range of affected groups and discourses. Participation can be assessed by an examination of the

breadth of voices engaged in a particular debate, the extent to which the different groups involved actually use public relations as part of their engagement strategies, and the balance between voices that it facilitates. At this level of analysis, the focus is more on the degree to which the public relations industry facilitates the inclusion of different discourses in deliberation rather than on the tactics and strategies used in individual campaigns. Relevant empirical questions will consider the range of groups using public relations to engage in debate on a particular issue (for example, as well as supporting the NRA and government spokespeople, are public relations resources available to and used by victim charities, anti-gun lobbying groups and educational organizations), as well as the quality of engagement between them: how vibrant is the deliberation, in terms of its scope and inclusiveness? How wide-ranging are the views being considered, and how are different discourses recognized and acknowledged by different parties in the deliberative engagement? At the issue level, public relations' effect on the consequential dimension of deliberative capacity can also be evaluated, through an empirical assessment of the relative influence of different groups on the outcome of the debate, the reasons why some campaigns are more consequential than others, and the contextual factors that underpin their influence.

**The system level.** Finally, assessments of public relations' overall contribution to deliberation must consider the degree to which it contributes to capacity across a deliberative system as a whole. The aggregate effect of public relations on the relative power of different groups in deliberative systems is one dimension to be considered, and the balance of power tends to lie with corporate and government interests. In the UK, for example, the majority of public relations is carried out by commercial or public sector organizations; they have more resources to invest and, in the majority of debates affecting them, their voices are louder than those of opposing groups. Their dominance is reinforced by other material and ideological advantages: members of their elite participate in networks of influence that exclude the vast

majority of the population, while they enjoy an ideological advantage over their opponents because their interests tend to align with hegemonic market rationalities (Davis, 2003, 2007; Miller and Dinan, 2008).

This is not to say that dominant groups always win deliberative debates; there are many examples of underdogs having a significant impact on the direction of a debate by using powerful public relations tactics in public space, and thereby influencing policymaking. This prompts us to pay attention not only to questions of existing material and structural dominance, but also to the effectiveness of public relations as a means of transmission and accountability, disseminating discourses within and between public and empowered space, and affecting the direction of policymaking through its ability to shape public opinion. Public relations' effect on the media agenda is important, but how it facilitates the movement of discourses between other online and offline spaces of deliberation such as blogs, social media discussions, and street demonstrations, is also crucial to this level of analysis. Empirical research will examine how public relations enacted for a particular organization enhances or diminishes their power, and on the role played by public relations as an actor in the complex communicative networks that underpin deliberative systems. Tracing discourses across public and empowered space, and establishing how their movement over time is facilitated – or blocked – by public relations tactics, can be combined with network analyses of public relations' relationships with other key actors in deliberative systems.

To summarise, I am arguing that three analytically distinct levels of analysis – campaign, issue and system - are needed to unpick public relations' effects on deliberative systems. Adopting this approach allows us to understand effects on one level without negating contradictory effects on another. The fact that public relations at a systemic level tends to support existing power structures that influence deliberative systems, for example, does not negate the good it can do when used by marginalized actors as a means of engaging

in deliberation on a specific issue, or when enlightened corporations use it as a means of genuine engagement with audiences. The effects are different, often simultaneous, and each comprises an important component of the role that PR plays in deliberation.

### **Conclusion**

Valuable work has been conducted on the role of public relations in democracy, showing how it can enhance relationships and add to societal debates. However, there has been a lack of engagement with the dimensions of public relations that are problematic for deliberative theory. The reality is that it can both enhance and reduce the quality of deliberation, depending on who is using it and what they are using it for. In this article, I have tried to make sense of this complexity by introducing deliberative systems theory as a framework for understanding where and how public relations acts deliberatively, and evaluating its ability to add to deliberative capacity.

The suggested framework should complement, rather than replace, other perspectives of public relations' role in society – it can offer a new way of assessing the effects of lobbying or public affairs campaigns, for example, as well as a context within which the importance of dialogic communication or rhetorical quality to deliberation can be articulated. It also suggests that the criteria often used to justify public relations as a positive influence on democracy, such as the quality of argumentation, the ethics of the speaker, the presence of dialogic communication, or the generation of social capital, are not sufficient for justifying its deliberative contribution. Without a clear link to a generalizable interest and evidence of genuine engagement, public relations campaigns remain an exercise in selfish advocacy.

The approach proposed in this article has two additional advantages for analysing public relations' deliberative role. First, it allows the variability of public relations to be accommodated within a single framework, because analyses can examine public relations implemented in multiple locations across a system and assess its aggregate effects. Second, it



requires analyses of individual campaigns to be connected to other elements in the system, producing a more nuanced, contextualized assessment of their impact on democracy.

Integrating variability and context into analyses of public relations is essential, because deliberation happens in an increasingly complex communicative environment; assessing the attributes of a single campaign in isolation of its surroundings has limited value.

Finally, the framework presents a theoretical and analytical intervention for deliberative theorists attempting to make sense of the extensive presence of organizational and institutional communication in deliberative engagements. Locating public relations more clearly in deliberative systems permits a more detailed assessment of how public relations-driven communication might enhance or constrain deliberative capacity. In addition, the campaign, issue and system levels of analysis allow deliberative theorists to connect analyses of specific instances of public relations with other actors, discourses and structures of deliberation in order to understand how it plays out as part of a wider deliberative system.

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