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Commentary

Public relations in deeply divided societies: Challenges of social inclusion, deliberative democracy, and inequality

Professor Ian Somerville, University of Leicester, in conversation with Professor Lee Edwards. London School of Economics and Political Science

Following the post-conference that gave rise to this special issue, Lee Edwards and Ian Somerville discussed some of the main themes he addressed in his keynote speech and recorded the exchange for this special issue. As readers will see, questions from Lee prompted Ian to expand on his view of public relations' role in politics and as a way of fostering citizenship in different societal arrangements. He draws on his own personal experience, on the complexities that a deeply divided society generates for public relations practitioners, and on the role it might play in societies seeking to foster robust, agonistic and ethical democratic discussions.

Lee: Your presentation at the post-conference raised the eternal conundrum that scholars of public relations face: the need to make sense of the fact that it is simultaneously a negative and positive force in society. It is both helpful for those in power, and an essential toolbox for those who are resisting subjugation. The work of critical PR scholars was originally designed to counter the optimistic understanding of PR as a positive asset for organisations and point out the power invested in its operations, but now scholars have become more nuanced about its effects. I think this is a welcome development because it means we can explore the profession's role as a resource for social change more effectively. However, your talk revealed the complexities of promotional work in practice. The problem is that as it becomes a recognised resource and more widespread, its use can lead to the depoliticisation and exclusion of the very people and interests it is designed to help - whether they are those in power or those outside it.

In my work on the role of PR in deliberative democracy, I used deliberative systems theory to try and understand these dynamics - but how to deal with them is a different matter. How has your personal experience of living in different societies - Northern Ireland, Scotland and England - influenced the way you think about these dilemmas?

Ian: You've mentioned personal experience and for many researchers this is of central importance in the work we do. That certainly has been true in my case, although I'm always conscious of Bourdieu's concern that researchers don't turn to merely talking about themselves rather than doing fieldwork! I grew up in Northern Ireland, which was at

the time a conflict society, but my first academic post was in Edinburgh, where in the mid-1990s I developed a module called 'Rhetorical and Critical Perspectives in PR' on a newly launched PR degree. The focus was precisely the concern you noted, to examine the role of PR in society in a way that was more nuanced and less simplistically 'ideological' than either the managerial, functionalist approaches typical of most PR textbooks at the time, or the 'Toxic Sludge is Good for You' approach, which blamed PR for destroying democracy, journalism and apparently everything that was good in the world.

In 2005 I returned to take up a university post in Northern Ireland and while things had clearly changed from the violent conflict society I grew up with – there was now what Galtung would call a negative peace – much remained the same. The education system, the social housing, the sporting culture, the media and politics were all still deeply segregated. Ethno-nationalist and religious identity markers dominated every aspect of people's lives, and one of the things I was immediately interested in was what this meant for PR. This was the beginning of a focus on social inclusion/exclusion and the role of promotional practices in conflict societies, both of which have run through much of my research for the past two decades.

With several excellent colleagues at Ulster University I investigated these questions across various projects in relation to, PR education in deeply divided societies (Somerville et al., 2011), PR and terrorism (Somerville and Purcell 2011), PR and peacebuilding (Somerville and Kirby 2012), sports promotion and inclusion (Hargie et al., 2015), and government communication in deeply divided societies (Rice and Somerville 2017).

I think the point needs to be made that a deeply divided society can be differentiated from a divided society – which currently could describe almost all societies including Great Britain and the USA. A deeply divided society is one where the social cleavages are usually the result of a period of extreme political violence and conflict, such as a civil war in the past. The history produces societal and personal trauma that take a long time to heal. It also produces a particular kind of environment for industries like PR, which influences its working practices in specific ways and also creates specific challenges in trying to study them. For example, in Northern Ireland the Press is largely divided along sectarian lines, with 'British'/unionist/protestant newspapers and 'Irish'/nationalist/catholic newspapers, both at the national and local level, which adds complexity to media relations. A PR practitioner who builds good relationships with journalists from one side of the divide can have zero traction in trying to engage with the other side. There are language sensitivities of various kinds and a press release might need to be rewritten depending on the publication a PR practitioner is targeting. For example, the British unionist media will report on a visit by 'His Majesty the King' to 'Northern Ireland' whereas the Irish nationalist media will report on a visit by the 'King of England' to the 'North of Ireland'. This level of media partisanship as a response to identitarian politics in Northern Ireland creates an environment for PR practitioners which is relatively unique in Western Europe.

Lee: You bring us to the realm of politics, which is one of the places where the presence of PR is both long-established, but often highly-criticised. The combination of PR and politics always raises questions about citizen participation. We both study deliberative

democracy, and the situations and debates you describe as characterising deeply-divided societies, do require us to question what kind of deliberative participation is needed for an inclusive politics, whether societies are divided or not - and what role public relations could play in facilitating that. What are your thoughts on the relationship between public relations and deliberative participation, having lived in three locations in the UK with different political structures? And how do you think the challenges of a divided society could inform improvements in other contexts?

Ian: In a post-conflict divided society context we have to reassess the assumptions around what we mean by inclusion/exclusion issues, and by deliberative democracy. Two important questions are: what are the democratic structures (particularly the constitutional architecture) of the state?; and, what do we mean by deliberation? All three polities in which I lived and worked have different democratic systems and England, where I now live, is arguably the least democratic of the three. It seems to be characterised more by exclusion than inclusion: firstly, the unelected Head of State must be a member of a small, declining religious sect; secondly, it has a completely unelected 'upper' chamber of the legislature (in which clerics from that religious sect are entitled to seats); and, thirdly the only element that involves elections, the lower chamber, uses an anomalous 'first-past-the-post' system to elect legislators. This invariably means that the government is formed by representatives of a minority of those who vote. The case is different for the Scottish Parliament, which is a more recognisably democratic legislature using a form of proportional representation to elect legislators, with the result that governments are frequently formed by a *voluntary coalition* of political parties. Northern Ireland's legislature is different again having a government formed by a *mandatory coalition* which must represent the main political parties from across the ethno-nationalist spectrum.

In Northern Ireland the 1998 peace agreement established a consociational system which ensures that a majoritarian democracy is avoided and guarantees minority rights and representation through power sharing via grand coalitions (major parties all have ministerial posts in government), proportionality and a system of mutual veto in relation to legislation. In my talk I suggested that consociationalism is a better way than majoritarianism to ensure political equity and encourage deliberative communication in deeply divided/conflicted societies. I noted the Israeli legal scholar Yehuda (2022) recommends it as the political solution which can underpin a 'collective equality' - where minorities as groups have human rights - rather than the current human rights frameworks which prioritise individualism. Overall, my point is that certain frameworks and structures can encourage meaningful deliberative engagement and others discourage it.

In regard to deliberative democracy, Habermas's idea is that political decisions should not be based on the force of numbers, but the force of the better argument and should be built on normative criteria such as inclusivity, rational argument and subordinating self-interest to the public interest. The Westminster Parliamentary system seems to largely fail against all of these normative criteria, while the Scottish parliament at least creates opportunities for deliberation and in the specific circumstances of a deeply divided society the Northern Irish consociational system offers even more space for deliberative

engagement. The consociational constitutional architecture, while not preventing walkouts, boycotts, and other forms of protest, has played a key role in building a peace that none of the key political actors are prepared to break.

PR in contemporary democracies can be most usefully described as a communicative tool for representing/promoting the interests of groups (sometimes individuals). This is why it has always surprised me to see its academic critics arguing that it has no place in a rational, deliberative democracy (Dinan and Miller, 2007). If we replaced the term 'public relations' with the term 'advocacy' (which essentially what PR is) would anyone suggest advocacy has no place in democratic societies, even though some advocates are better-resourced than others? The important issue is actually that of transparency, and concerns about that could be even more appropriately raised about bad faith media and political actors many of whom spent a great deal of time and resources actively discouraging rational, deliberative democracy.

PR is merely a tool and like any other practice grounded in rhetorical persuasive communication it can be used to promote social justice or as a force for division. As I mentioned in my presentation, Shane Kirby and I analysed the 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns around the 1998 referendum in Northern Ireland (Somerville and Kirby, 2012) which was required to ensure the Good Friday Peace Agreement could be legally enacted. The campaigns were the first occasion on which Northern Irish political parties employed public relations companies and, while there was an overwhelming yes vote (71%), thanks to professional PR input there were notable and innovative campaigns from both sides. So, as is the case with politics more widely, the problem is not PR per se but, as you have pointed out in the past, the willingness to engage in inclusive deliberative systems (Edwards, 2016). My own position is that secure democratic structures in stable peaceful societies are required to ensure that the communicative conflict inherent in such forms don't spill over into physical conflict. This does not necessarily preclude a role for agonism in deliberative engagement in post-conflict societies but it does require caution if it is not to reactivate the wounds that led to violent conflict in the first place.

Lee: You raise a good point about the potential for PR to be used in different ways, by a wide range of actors and of course PR theorists would say that this is part of the valuable role that PR can play in democratic life. But we started by thinking about issues of inclusion and exclusion, and regardless of political structures, it is the case that many groups (the poorest of society, Indigenous groups, those who suffer from intense stigma) remain outside political structures and so are excluded from deliberative processes that might influence outcomes. This is a different kind of divided society, but one that we can all recognise. And then there is the challenge of deliberative discussions, which are not always easy and can be more antagonistic than agonistic. They require honesty and openness from participants to other views, which can feel risky, particularly in contexts where polarised political landscapes suggest that a win or lose scenario is the only outcome of talking to people with differing views. How does one balance the need for deliberation with the need for stability and cohesion, and foster a more agonistic approach to political life? And what role do you think PR could play in making this a reality?

Ian: Exclusion has been central to very important political debates for the past couple of generations as societies struggle with a host of social issues and transformations. It's not always clear what exclusion is, and my thinking about the concept was very much influenced by the reading I did for a research project about a decade ago (Hargie et al., 2015). Silver (1994) notes there are various paradigms of exclusion in social science literature, a key one, the 'solidarity' paradigm views exclusion as damaging for a person, because is fractures their material and symbolic exchange with society. Ultimately it is also seen as damaging for society because it threatens the social fabric and perhaps even leads to a breakdown in social order and collective values. This paradigm emerged in France most explicitly with the publication of the book '*Les Exclus*' in 1976 with its focus on the bonds (individual, institutional and economic) which connects the individual to society, but of course is has been significant elsewhere, for example *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) etc.

It's clear that PR can be deployed both to enforce exclusion (PR has certainly been used promote discrimination and reinforce hierarchical structures of status, class, and political power) or to challenge it and promote social inclusion. There has been some good work focusing on how PR practitioners can help build inclusion at the organisational level (Hou et al., 2025). Macnamara's (2016) focus on the importance of active listening also promotes a communication approach which attempts to embed social inclusion in PR activity. A 'listening organisation' would be concerned to capture the voices of the traditionally marginalised, vulnerable and underrepresented and empower them to influence the organisation. This focus on listening has relevance for your question about the merits of deliberative versus agonistic approaches. We should consider the question of risk in communicative approaches, especially in relation to deeply divided societies - but before we reflect on which approach produces the best outcomes, we also need to ask what the intention is of those engaging. Do they want to live in a shared society? If one side of a conflict has most of the capacity for hard power, that may not be their objective. A deeply divided society has ultimately two approaches to political engagement, bargaining or deliberation, and I would suggest bargaining will never lead to a truly shared society. There is a much better chance of developing shared institutions and societal stability through deliberation, because the essence of deliberation is participants' willingness to listen with an open mind and make an honest attempt to see things as the other side see them. This process is important in airing viewpoints and articulating arguments resulting in both sides embracing broader and more encompassing viewpoints.

I think deliberation is an important mechanism in any deeply divided society for making decisions about the future, that is if you want the future to have any chance of being stable and cohesive - but your question about agonistic engagement is an important one and is pertinent in the context of societies where violent conflict makes beginning a process of deliberative engagement difficult. In deeply divided societies, the deep scars of conflict or violent oppression mean the past also needs to be engaged with. Perhaps here is where an agonistic engagement has a place. Coming to terms with the past, particularly one defined by identity-based differences that have left deep wounds, will necessarily involve passion and emotional communication. Dryzek

(2010), noted that expecting 'reasonableness' in such contexts is problematic, and from my understanding of his argument he would agree that in the context of deep division an emphasis on strict rationality can be counterproductive. The reciprocal exchange of stories can lead to a better understanding of both sides' needs. More generally, agonists tend to argue that deliberation is far too restrictive a communication model with its focus on reason and its dismissal of expressions of emotion as inappropriate, manipulative or coercive. However, in a deeply divided post-conflict society those who have experienced oppression and are trying to articulate their perspectives are likely to frequently use passion and emotion rather than carefully crafted 'rational' argument. Are we expecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, Native Americans, Rohingya, Palestinians, and so many others to easily set aside the memories of years (perhaps centuries) of oppression and exclusion?

In my view, 'unreasonable' exchanges of emotional rhetoric that convey the persistence of a painful existence should be understood as an important part of achieving understanding between groups engaged in deliberative mechanisms. Dryzek (2010) argues that consensus is not always essential in deliberative processes; more important is that agreement emerges from a universally recognised process of deliberative scrutiny. This could be viewed as an acknowledgement of agonism by the pre-eminent scholar of deliberative principles.

I can offer an example from political public relations in Northern Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement referendum campaign, which I referred to above, contained very vibrant, emotional, agonistic messaging, targeting only partisan support, particularly from the anti-agreement side. This approach was accepted as legitimate and fair by the professional PR-led pro-agreement side. They nevertheless emphasised deliberative democratic decision making and advanced arguments for shared and equal future for all (Somerville and Kirby, 2012). The outcome was that a majority on both sides of the ethno-political divide voted for the peace agreement, which was centrally important in ensuring its legitimacy and longevity.

Can we relate this to the debate between agonistic approaches and deliberative approaches in current PR theorising? If we understand this current theorising to be centrally concerned with the role of public relations as an important societal force and not merely a strategic communication tool for organisational managers then I believe so. Davidson's work (2016, 2025) on integrating agonistic theories into PR practices is a very fruitful approach. Its encouragement of organisations to recognise the legitimacy of dissensus ultimately fosters empowerment and inclusivity, and is certainly preferable to the model of PR that focuses on control and management. Considering what has been called the 'agonistic turn' (Maddison, 2014) in deliberative theory, I would suggest there is more common ground here between deliberation and agonism than might at first be apparent. Some deliberative theorists (Escobar, 2011) suggest that valuing consensus above everything else can risk ignoring what is really important about deliberation, active listening to achieve understanding of the other. The link between this viewpoint and the idea of PR being central to building an 'architecture of listening' (Macnamara, 2016) in organisations is apparent and offers the possibility of counterbalancing traditional hierarchies. If we agree that the only ethical

and inclusive organisation is one which listens to and engages with all its stake-holders, including the traditionally marginalised and the powerless, then the communicative responsibilities of organisational public relations are clear if it wants to avoid the charge that it simply serves narrow interests or exacerbates division. Ethical and inclusive PR, much like political peacebuilding, necessitates engaging transparently and truthfully with all actors.

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