UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC RELATIONS

THEORY, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

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CHAPTER 1

STARTING POINTS

DEFINING SOCIO-CULTURAL RESEARCH IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

INTRODUCTION

In the course of the past century, public relations has become a normal part of the pro-motional environment that surrounds us on a day-to-day basis. It has been integrated into the activities of all kinds of organisations; taken up by individuals to promote nar-ratives of themselves and the world they know through online and digital media; used by high-profile celebrities to manage their public profile; and deployed by governments and terrorist organisations alike to manage public opinion and build alliances. In contrast to the 'hidden persuaders' of the past, public relations work is often very visible: new technologies mean that campaigns make use of private as well as public spaces, engage us in 'conversation', promote 'relationships' with organisations and co-opt our loyalty to maximise their persuasive power. The ubiquity of public relations means that it now has an inescapable influence on us, as part of the resources we draw on both individually and collectively, when we navigate our way through life.

In this book, I argue that understanding the importance and influence of public relations in the contemporary world is best achieved by examining its effects on society and cul-ture. I consciously depart from the functional approach to studying public relations, which tends to focus on its role within organisations. Very little of that approach is reflected in the following pages. Instead, the discussions in each chapter have their roots in the edited collection *Public Relations, Society and Culture* (Edwards and Hodges, 2011), in which we argued that the body of work adopting a socio-cultural approach in public relations was both burgeoning and important. Then, as now, the point was made that organisa-tional analyses of public relations are essential to understanding what practitioners do, how their work fits within organisational structures and how they contribute to organi-sational survival. However, organisations are not the only places where public relations techniques have been used, nor do organisational boundaries constitute the limits of public relations' effects. While contemporary forms of public relations have developed in the context of modernity, the growth of capitalism, the spread of democracy, globalisation and networked societies, they have their roots in a much longer and more variable history of persuasive communication. Institutions and individuals, from churches, emperors and kings to scientists, politicians, army generals, merchants and slaves, have long used public relations-style tactics, even if they were not formally labelled as such. These histories of public relations remind us that it can take many forms and is used for a wide range of purposes, by formally and informally constituted groups as well as individuals. It may be institutionalised and formalised in modern organisations, but its tools and techniques are much more widespread (L'Etang and Pieczka, 1996).

Given the scale and reach of public relations work, there remains a need for more comprehensive analyses of the occupation as a social and cultural practice in its own right. This is not to say that organisations are unimportant. On the contrary, organisations of all kinds play an enormously significant role as an institutional force that influences our lives.

Yet, studies of public relations focused on its role within organisations do not generally acknowledge this dimension of their existence. Instead, they tend to examine organisations in isolation from their social, cultural and political contexts, and organisational objectives as unproblematic ends. Public relations is understood as a tool to support organisational survival – and the environment is a factor that must be managed along the way.

Adopting a socio-cultural approach redresses this balance somewhat. It complements the detailed understanding we have of practitioners as organisational functionaries, with a broader and more critical lens focused on the implications of their work beyond organisational boundaries (L'Etang, 2008; McKie and Xifra, 2016). It opens up extensive new territory for public relations research, and there has been a socio-cultural 'turn' in public relations scholarship (Edwards and Hodges, 2011), producing creative and interesting work.[1] In the following pages, I bring together a number of different areas of interest for scholars adopting a socio-cultural perspective in their analyses of public relations. It is by no means exhaustive and should be viewed as a set of starting points, a springboard for new work that will continue to develop the field.

In this chapter I set out in detail what is meant by a socio-cultural perspective of public relations, to provide readers with a reference point for the arguments made in the rest of the book. I then consider what aspects of contemporary society and culture underpin the socio-cultural research we might do. These themes reappear throughout the book, and I discuss them here as a reference point for readers to use as they delve into other topics in more detail. Finally, I introduce the structure of the book and provide a brief summary of each chapter.

WHAT IS A SOCIO-CULTURAL APPROACH TO PUBLIC RELATIONS AND WHY IS IT NECESSARY?

What does it mean to explore public relations 'beyond organisational boundaries'? Does such an idea make sense, given that public relations is most often executed by practitioners working on behalf of organisations? It is important to note that socio-cultural research on public relations does not ignore organisations; on the contrary, the point is to interrogate the kinds of influence that organisations have on the way we live our lives. As functional research powerfully illustrates, public relations is a tool through which organisations try to exercise that influence with particular outcomes in mind, but it is also a practice that has agency beyond organisational objectives. It generates change in ways that organisations rarely foresee or plan for, because it has embedded itself deeply in the fabric of our social and cultural practices.

What forms does this embeddedness take? First, public relations draws its tools and techniques from the ways we habitually connect with, communicate with and inform each

other about the world around us. Practitioners are encouraged to be in touch with social trends, technologies, communication channels and cultural phenomena, which they use to enhance the relevance and circulation of organisational messages to target audiences. They piggyback off the latest movie or pop sensation, calendar events (Valentine's day, Mother's day, Gay Pride parades, other national days of celebration) or the latest news stories to weave topical themes into their campaigns. They follow audience information-seeking behaviour and place stories where they are most likely to be seen – on Twitter or Instagram, via a blogger or vlogger, via mainstream news sites or in offline spaces. Alternatively, they will adjust their communication around cultural norms to make it more powerful (for example, by challenging norms in a dramatic way) or acceptable (by aligning with norms to make a message more easily understandable). For example, Proctor and Gamble's 'Touch the Pickle' campaign aimed to break taboos around menstruation in India (AFAQS, 2017), while in the UK, TV broadcaster Channel 4's ongoing 'Superhumans' campaign for the Paralympics challenges stereotypes about people with a disability (Channel 4, 2016). In the process of doing all these things, practitioners disembed socio-cultural norms and practices from their original context, relocate them into new environments, and repurpose them in communication that serves specific ends. In this way, public relations both intervenes in and instrumentalises different aspects of society and culture.

Second, the pervasiveness of promotional practices means that public relations-style tools and techniques have themselves become woven into our assumptions about the ways we can and should relate to and engage with others. In an 'attention economy' (Davenport and Beck, 2002), we expect organisations to communicate with us, explain their actions and persuade us to support them. While we may be sceptical and even cynical about their communication, we are likely to be disappointed if they do not respond to our complaints, or critical if they are unable to deal effectively with a crisis. In our relationships with other individuals, we often adopt techniques of self-promotion in our interactions, working with an implicit understanding that to be successful our identities need to be appealing, to stand out, to act as a 'brand' that can generate social and economic benefits – better jobs, greater popularity, more income, greater purpose in life (Lair et al., 2005; Hearn, 2008). We also use brands as resources to build narratives of our own identities – to show our values to others (for example, when we shop for fair trade products, or animal-friendly cosmetics) (Harrison et al., 2005; Arvidsson, 2006; Aronczyk, 2013a).

The integration of promotional thinking into daily life has become so ubiquitous and matter-of-fact that we may not even be aware of it. Nonetheless, it constitutes fertile terrain for public relations to influence the ways in which society and culture are organised, and is the basis for the case that socio-cultural research on public relations is warranted. However, while the idea of a socio-cultural 'turn' in public relations is frequently cited, it is often deployed without further explanation. For the sake of clarity, it is worth considering what is meant in more detail. A precise definition of a 'socio-cultural turn' is not possible (the potential terrain for research – society and culture – is huge and varied) or desirable (definitions have a tendency to produce 'habits of mind' (Margolis, 1993)

that can limit the scope of thinking and research). However, the following assumptions about public relations provide a good starting point for understanding the foundations of socio-cultural research and allow us to differentiate it from functional work:[2]

1. Standpoints for understanding public relations are many and varied.
2. Public relations is shaped by the cultures and societies in which it operates.
3. Public relations has agency; it intervenes in society beyond the organisational context, and generates some kind of change.
4. The effects of public relations work must be measured in social and cultural terms, as well as in terms of organisational interests.
5. Public relations is value-driven rather than value-neutral; it has the potential to engender both power and resistance.

Characteristics of research based on these assumptions are variable, but there are some commonalities across most studies. First, the focus of empirical investigations is on revealing public relations as a 'contingent, cultural activity that forms part of the communicative process by which society constructs its symbolic and material "reality"' (Edwards and Hodges, 2011: 3). The changes it generates will be intentional (built into the public relations strategy) as well as unintentional (unforeseen effects of campaigns on the way we think about the world, our place within it, and our relationships with others). Analyses go beyond whether or not organisational objectives have been met, to reveal the wider social, cultural and political consequences that those objectives might have instigated.

Second, the relationship between public relations and society is mutually transformative. Public relations is shaped by its social and cultural context and is 'a locus of transactions that produce emergent social and cultural meanings' (Edwards and Hodges, 2011: 4), where transactions are events that happen 'across actors who are aspects of a relationally integrated whole … the actors *are* the continuously emerging meaning in a trans-action' (Simpson, 2009: 1334) In other words, because public relations stimulates transactions between societal actors, it also contributes to their meaning in relation to each other and over time. The changes to the fabric of society and culture that result are, in turn, integrated back into public relations identities, processes and practices.

Third, research tends to complicate the identity and outcomes of public relations by rejecting simplistic explanations of cause and effect and instead searching for complexity in context and practice. As Caroline Hodges and I have noted, '[t]he messiness of day to day practice, with its contradictions and inconsistencies, should not be regarded as a "difficulty" of public relations, but part of its ontology, of the continuous flow of transactions that is public relations reality, simultaneously producing, enacting and feeding back into, social and cultural norms' (Edwards and Hodges, 2011: 8). Fluidity and change are often at the forefront of analyses, with rigid categorisations less common. Persistent continuities in social and cultural hierarchies remain crucial to explanations of public relations' impact on society, but they are rarely framed as absolute.

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Fourth, socio-cultural analyses of public relations engage in various ways with questions of power. They may focus on the way public relations affects the distribution of power between groups in specific contexts or across society, its capacity to empower or disempower different audiences, its use as a tool for securing or resisting power by different organisations, the ways in which different identities, behaviours and values are represented as more or less powerful in public relations discourse, or the way power operates within the profession. The focus on power is crucial because it reveals how public relations work plays into the struggles between dominant and subordinated groups that mark all societies.

Finally, socio-cultural work on public relations is concerned with how public relations is experienced and understood in people's day-to-day lives. It 'shifts the ontological and epistemological focus of the field towards the socially constructed nature of practice, process and outcomes' (Edwards and Hodges, 2011: 3). Research is most often guided by an interpretive epistemology and qualitative methodologies; questions of meaning, representation and lived experience all take priority over measurement and quantification, although the latter may serve a useful purpose in some studies.

If these are the characteristics of the socio-cultural turn in public relations research, then what kinds of questions do researchers adopting this approach actually grapple with? The short answer is that they address public relations' role in many of the long-standing analytical challenges that arise when we try to understand how societies and cultures operate. Below, I explore some of these questions in more detail. The discussion here is necessarily brief: many books have been written on each of the areas I discuss, and many different theories ventured. This is not the place to review them all in great depth. However, it is important to introduce them because they are relevant to many of the chapters that follow, and the debates about them reappear in the pages of this book in different ways.

HOW ARE SOCIETIES STRUCTURED AND ORGANISED?

Social structures are institutionalised ideological and material systems that provide the parameters for the ways we live our lives and organise ourselves into groups within society (Swingewood, 2000). They are grounded in different aspects of identity, such as our gender, class, caste, disability, 'race' or religion, which are constructed as more or less valuable in society (Hall, 1997a).[3] In the case of gender, for example, women tend to be normatively viewed as subordinate to men; in the case of 'race' and ethnicity, people who are white tend to be privileged over people of colour; for class, higher levels of education, wealth and white-collar employment tend to attract higher status; and LGBT identities tend to be subordinated to heterosexuality and cisgender.[4] These categorisations play a role in determining what kinds of opportunities are available to us – for example, employment,

healthcare or housing. Consequently, social hierarchies are reproduced through institutional structures such as the education system, the labour market and the housing market (Bourdieu, 2005).

Structures matter because the social hierarchies that emerge from them translate into systemic, institutionalised (dis)advantage (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Reskin, 2012): if we have better access to material resources such as education, housing, healthcare and employment, and to symbolic resources such as status and worth, then we are likely to enjoy a life that is marked by greater wealth, privilege and choice about our life course. Good schools and housing, for example, tend to be concentrated in wealthy areas and are therefore more accessible to upper-class groups; access to good healthcare can also be determined by income and housing; senior positions in organisations tend to be occupied by white men, rather than people of colour or women. We also pass on privilege to our children, both through inherited wealth and through the norms, values and attitudes that we communicate to them in their formative years (Bourdieu, 1984). The opposite is true for those whose social position is disadvantageous: their access to material, social and cultural resources that might support social mobility for future generations is likely to be much more limited.

For socio-cultural research on public relations, the importance of structures raises questions about the degree to which public relations plays into the perpetuation of structural inequalities. On the one hand, it may reinforce social hierarchies by presenting them as taken-for-granted realities rather than socially constructed categories. It may also reinforce the legitimacy of material structures – the segregation of education, employment or healthcare by wealth, gender or age, for example – as ideal or appropriate ways of achieving social goals. On the other hand, it may be used to challenge these same things, when marginalised groups use it to object to the categorisation of their identities, or when new groups and organisations attempt to change the institutional status quo.

HOW DO INDIVIDUALS MAKE CHOICES ABOUT THEIR LIVES?

How our identities are defined by society and how resources are allocated are, of course, related, but the causal link between them is complicated by the normativity of structure: that is, we often regard structural norms as common sense, integrate them into the ways we conduct our lives, and use them to make sense of the world (Giddens, 1984). We take our privilege and our disadvantage for granted, and thereby perpetuate structures that constrain the lives of some while facilitating progress for others. In other words, structures are an important and relatively stable source of social inequality. They do not fully determine our lives; people can and do 'break out' of social hierarchies, achieving social mobility and other forms of change that counter prescribed pathways. Our capacity to confound

the deterministic power of structures is a matter of agency, or the degree to which we can make choices about our lives that are independent of structural norms.

Most theorists agree that complete independence from structure is not possible because structures provide the context for action (Haugaard, 2002). In our relationships with others, we therefore inevitably reproduce structure because we draw on its characteristics and resources (Giddens, 1979: 88). Nonetheless, the reality that we do make choices that sometimes go against structural norms needs an explanation, and this is most often found in framings of structure and agency as a duality rather than totally independent entities, as well as in our human ability to reflect on our lives. As reflexive beings, we have the capacity to step back from situations, understand them from a perspective external to ourselves, use new information that comes our way to inform our opinions, and make choices that incorporate the insights derived from distancing ourselves in this way (Giddens, 1991).

The pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead, for example, places reflexivity at the heart of human agency, proposing an interpretation of selfhood that is grounded in sociality, or 'the situatedness of actors in multiple temporally evolving relational contexts' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 969). Mead conceptualises agency as the development of reflexive capabilities to make choices about action, based on a notion of self that incorporates both the individual and the social in the form of the 'me' and the 'I' (Mead, 1934). The 'me' arises in relation to the 'generalised other', 'the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self' (Mead, 1934: 154). The 'me' reflects on the self from the point of view of this generalised other. Inextricably linked with the 'me' is the 'I', an aspect of the self that reflects independently of the generalised other, and is a source of innovation and change. The actions of the 'I' are ultimately incorporated into the 'me' that, in turn, engages with and may alter the social environment. Building on Mead, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that agency must account for temporality and context, since

> [t]he ways in which people understand their own relationship to the past, future, and present make a difference to their actions; changing conceptions of agentic possibility in relation to structural contexts profoundly influence how actors in different periods and places see their worlds as more or less responsive to human imagination, purpose, and effort. (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 974)

They suggest agency is best understood as a three-dimensional, temporal and relational engagement with structure involving reflections on past, stable patterns of thought and action; imagining future possibilities for action; and choosing actions from a range of options available in the present (1998: 970). These three dimensions of agency co-exist in any situation, but their relative dominance will vary.

The degree to which structural power is subject to what Giddens (1984) termed a 'dialectic of control' is a matter of intense debate. Skeggs et al. (2008), for example,

demonstrate that reflexivity is a resource stratified by class, rather than being universally available to all. Indeed, if the ability to choose how to use structural resources (our gender, age, education, for example) in our interactions with others and reflect on those choices were common, one would expect a more variable distribution of resources over time along with corresponding changes in social status (Stewart, 2001). In reality, social mobility is remarkably slow to evolve (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). Moreover, our choices are not independent of history – our past informs how we see ourselves and the possibilities available to us, as well as determining how others see us (Hall, 1990; Ahmed, 2006). In the digital age, the online world both constrains and facilitates agency, offering enormous possibilities for empowerment, but also opening up individuals to judgement and ostracisation. Given the impossibility of stepping outside our social context, perhaps a more appropriate understanding of agency is that it takes different forms and is expressed differently, depending on the aspects of identity (race, class, gender, and other forms of status) that come into play in a particular context (see, for example, Hulko, 2009; Rampersad, 2014; Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017; Vivienne, 2017).

When focused on agency, socio-cultural research on public relations engages with the ways in which the interplay between structure and agency is shaped by public relations activities. Some campaigns may facilitate choice and reflexivity, for example, by bringing new information to light and revealing new possibilities for action, or by making visible the lives of 'others' and prompting us to reflect differently on our own privilege or disadvantage. Others may simply reinforce structural norms by reiterating and normalising historical relations, reinforcing what we understand as our 'place' in society, and reduce our capacity to consider alternatives. The specific circumstances of particular campaigns – the country, target audience, organisations involved and the wider political, economic, social and cultural environment – will also affect the impact they have on agency, and so analysing agency in socio-cultural research would place public relations work in these contexts in order to fully understand its effects. It would also recognise that our capacity to act in relation to others can vary greatly, depending on the structural parameters we are faced with.

HOW IS IDENTITY CONSTRUCTED AND REPRESENTED IN THE CONTEXT OF A COMMUNITY?

Questions of how we make sense of our identity and communicate it to others are closely related to the ideas about the self that underpin agency, and link the idea of an intrinsic self to the social context. Identity is generally understood to be socially constructed; that is, it develops through our interactions and involves choices about how we want to

be understood, positioned or seen by both ourselves and others. The changing conditions of modernity have included an increase in the need for individuals to take personal responsibility for those choices, including decisions about how we construct our identities symbolically (for example, by associating ourselves with different brands), physically (for example, by wearing particular clothes, hairstyles, tattoos, jewellery) and cognitively (by understanding and communicating our identities to ourselves and others via face-to-face or online channels such as social media) (Beck et al., 1994).

Giddens (1991: 75) suggests that '[t]he self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible …. We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves'. Reifying reflexivity to this extent would assume that all our choices are rationally and consciously made, with the individual a free-floating subject, disconnected from structural constraints. Even for those people for whom reflexivity is a ready skill, this is an unrealistic assumption. And yet it is true that contemporary popular culture is awash with models and techniques for self-management (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Blum-Ross and Livingstone, 2017; Hearn, 2017). The different modes of selfhood they suggest introduce opportunity as well as the risk that our choices turn out to be suboptimal or have unintended consequences. From this perspective, '[s]elf-actualisation is … a balance between opportunity and risk' (Giddens, 1991: 78).

History plays an important role in how identity emerges: we make choices not only in the present and as a function of our ambitions for the future, but also based on what we know about ourselves and others from the past. The physical body plays an important role here as 'the signifier of the condensation of subjectivities in the individual' over time (Hall, 1996: 11), a basis for stereotyping our identities. Stereotypes attributed to us produce preconceptions about our abilities and our right to belong in certain locations and groups, acting as 'conditions of arrival' that accompany us into different locations. In predetermining who we 'are' for others, these (incomplete) discourses of identity generate subject positions which others orient towards, shaping our experience in different ways, marginalising some, while welcoming others (Puwar, 2004; Ahmed, 2006). In our individual responses to these subjectivities, we may partially or fully conform to or resist them, reinterpret or reject them. Correspondingly, identity should never be understood as complete or final, but rather as something that emerges continuously in a fluid, ongoing process as we encounter new environments and subject positions to which we must react. As Hall (1990: 222) notes, '[w]ho speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. … [W]e should think, instead, of identity as a "production", always a process, and always constituted within not outside, representation'.

Questions of how identity is formed, maintained and represented are central to sociocultural research on public relations. The call for practitioners to 'connect' and manage 'relationships' with audiences inevitably entails appealing to us as individuals with personal hopes and aspirations. The latter provide the material for constructing public relations discourses that offer a pathway to realising those aspirations, by associating ourselves

with different kinds of products, services, causes or political identities in ways that allow us to be, and be seen as, particular 'types' of people (ethical, 'cool', technologically savvy, connected, professional). Public relations campaigns also draw on stereotypical identities that can act as a 'shortcut' for us to interpret the messages that are being communicated (for example, associating women with the family, the domestic sphere and 'emotional' work, associating men with professional status, physical work outside the home). Socio-cultural research on public relations interrogates both the use of identity in campaigns as well as the ways identity 'cues' and stereotypes are taken up or challenged by audiences. Identities also play into social hierarchies, and critical research would investigate how the power of certain groups is perpetuated by the protection and reification of their identities in campaigns, as well as how others might assert their identities from the margins, in order to achieve greater visibility and recognition.

HOW DO WE MANAGE TO LIVE HARMONIOUSLY TOGETHER?

In any society, there is an inevitable tension between the need for individuals to compromise with others in order to sustain a peaceful co-existence and the desire to serve one's own personal interests. Reaching agreement about how to manage these tensions is an important social process, and analysing how it is achieved helps us to understand how societies come to establish the norms and values of community life, as well as how that life should be governed. That said, the tension between collective and individual interests is permanent, and makes it impossible to have a situation where agreement is constant. Consequently, the focus of many theorists working in this area has been on how disagreement and conflict might play out.

Debates revolve around the pre-conditions for debate and disagreement to be managed in a positive way, and have attracted detailed theoretical investigations of the role of conflict in social life. The quality of deliberation between individuals and groups is crucial. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has argued for the pursuit of the public sphere, an ideal discursive space where members of society engage in discussion about matters of public interest and challenge decisions made by those who govern society (Habermas, 1989, 1996). For Habermas, deliberation in the public sphere should be based on equal status between participants, inclusivity of all those affected by an issue, rational argument and a focus on pursuing agreement about the common good, rather than the realisation of individual interests (Garnham, 1992; Lunt and Livingstone, 2013; see Chapter 6). Critics have challenged some of Habermas's assumptions, arguing that multiple public spheres exist, focused on different issues and group interests (Fraser, 1990), or that deliberation plays out across a range of different locations and in a range of forms (Dryzek, 2000). The interconnectedness of societies across time and

space in the context of globalisation has led to the suggestion that public spheres should be transnational, focused on challenging international regulatory bodies that have much greater power over how we live than national governments (Fraser, 2007; Nash, 2014). Others argue that the emphasis on reaching agreement is misplaced, because disagreement is inherent to social life; instead, the focus should be on engaging with those who disagree with us respectfully, as antagonists rather than adversaries (Mouffe, 1999; see Chapters 5 and 6 later).

Another way of looking at the problem of living harmoniously together is by examining how we actually reach agreement about things once we are engaged in debate. Luc Boltanski and his colleagues have argued that we do this through a dialectical process of justification and critique, where different principles for organising social life are drawn on during debates. The disconnect between them is overcome only when a higher principle of agreement is identified that all parties to the discussion can accept. These situations are always temporary, however, because 'ordinary people … never stop suspecting, wondering and submitting the world to tests' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]: 37). Moreover, the inherent plurality of a globalised world means that new information is constantly circulating and alternative 'readings' of a situation always come into play, prompting a renewed cycle of justification and critique (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006 [1991]; see also Edwards, 2018).

How do these insights inform socio-cultural research into public relations? Like media theorists, who have asked difficult questions about the ways that media industries influence our engagement with political debates both positively (by making information available to us) and negatively (by marginalising some voices), public relations theorists need to ask questions about how the promotional work carried out by practitioners on behalf of different groups contributes to the quality, scope and inclusivity of discussions about matters of public concern and interest. Just as the role of the media is complex and context-dependent, the role of public relations needs to be understood as fluid, sometimes contradictory, but always important. The ubiquity and relative cheapness of public relations techniques, particularly in the digital age, where messages circulate more freely and rapidly than ever before, means it will be used by all kinds of groups wishing to make their voices heard. In public relations texts, we see forms of justification and critique, the different principles that people draw on for their positions, and the ways in which those positions might converge over time. Detailed empirical work focused on this complex role is a mainstay of socio-cultural approaches to public relations.

HOW IS SOCIETY CHANGING?

Persistent questions of structure and agency, identity and harmonious living are all inflected by contemporary social conditions, and so understanding how society is

changing is fundamental to how we answer each of the previous challenges. In recent years, the rise of neoliberalism, the digital age and the emergence of networked societies have all resulted in deep shifts in the fabric of society and culture, and are particularly important to understanding public relations today.

THE RISE OF NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberal ideology is grounded in a belief in the fundamental importance of individual freedoms to the management of society and the pursuit of capital (Harvey, 2005). Manifest in economic and political arrangements, it leads to the prioritisation of private property, individual choice and free market systems over public ownership, collective welfare and state interventions. Its popularity began during the global financial crisis of the 1970s, when the collapse of Keynesian economics led to worldwide recession and a renewed and strategic interest among elites in the preservation of their wealth. Neoliberalism promised a path to reducing state management of their assets, opening up new opportunities for capital accumulation and limiting the power of troublesome institutions such as unions and activist movements. Thus, it has always been a mechanism for constructing and maintaining inequality, rather than overcoming it (Harvey, 2005).

The proactive promotion of neoliberal principles during the 1970s, through think-tanks, economic advisors and global institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, eventually led to governments worldwide adopting neoliberal policies that position the market as the main mechanism for managing all sorts of social arrangements. This normalisation of neoliberalism as a rationale for action in a wide range of contexts (Couldry, 2010) has reified markets as the ultimate mechanism for exchanging public and private goods, deregulation and competition as the parameters for exchange, and the consumer as a figure to which producers must orient themselves. These forms of market logic now affect sectors not formerly thought of in market terms, such as education, healthcare, public transport and the media, because they generate public rather than private goods.

Once markets become the primary mechanism for the distribution of resources and wealth, the language of markets becomes more visible in sectors where it was previously unknown, and organisations begin to act in accordance with market principles (see, for example, Sanders, 2012; Cronin, 2016). At the same time, other ideas and priorities relating to public life, collective welfare and the common good become neglected, are often absent from public and organisational discourse, and the language to frame them as a viable alternative to markets becomes less practised and easier to dismiss with hegemonic, market-based arguments. Consumption is now used to describe our use of anything from toilet paper to university education; we are designated consumers and customers in the process; and organisations focus on measuring satisfaction, value for money, appropriate pricing and good service in the process of establishing their legitimacy (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992).

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Understanding the environment as a market also means that organisations must recognise the competition they face from other institutions and sectors, and correspondingly prioritise promotional activities in order to be visible and manage their reputation. Branding, for example, thrives under neoliberalism, while the public relations industry has grown exponentially as the ideology has extended its global reach (see Chapters 4 and 7). The power of promotional work can seem unassailable in the context of the hegemonic rationality of markets for organising our collective lives. For organisations, promotional logic is now indispensable and drives many decisions about production, as well as being a mechanism for managing stakeholder engagement, reputation and consumption (see Chapter 2). The power of marketisation and promotional logic to regulate even our own personal identity management has become enormous. We are encouraged to think of ourselves as a 'brand', something to shape, adapt, instrumentalise and ultimately use in our pursuit of a better life (Lair et al., 2005; Hearn, 2008, 2012; Thumim, 2012). Public relations plays into these dynamics in an important way: it benefits from them as an industry; it perpetuates the normalisation of promotional logic; and it provides the tools for individuals and organisations to compete with others in the way that market logic prescribes. On the other hand, it can also give voice and visibility to alternative ideologies that might challenge neoliberalism, and be used to reassert the importance of collective welfare and the public good (Thörn, 2007; Taylor, 2010; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Edwards, 2016b).

THE DIGITAL AGE

The expansion of digital technologies since the last decades of the twentieth century has produced a world where digital modes of connection and communication pervade every aspect of our lives. Digital technologies are fundamental to the processes of time–space distanciation and disembedding that Giddens describes: relationships are no longer bound by geography, but can be conducted in a shared digital space that persists regardless of geographical or temporal constraints (Giddens, 1990). Our means of communication, connection and community-building have been transformed. The digital age is also characterised by datafication, or a world where quantification and numbers carry enormous power, and the 'desire for numbers' drives action among organisations and individuals, including the normalisation of data mining processes that deliver big data. This desire for numbers is accompanied by a desire for more: more likes, more shares, more hits, more followers – all evidenced numerically and demonstrating sociability, connectedness and status for organisations and individuals as digital participants (Kennedy, 2016).

Digital technologies have transformed the conditions for public relations work. In organisations, the variety, speed and reach of communication allow messages to be

carried further and faster than before, and generate the capacity to create connections between them and their desired audiences across the globe (Zerfass et al., 2017). In the media, new outlets for public relations work have emerged as platform innovations, while enhanced engagement with audiences means that eye-witness footage, bloggers, citizen journalists and alternative news sources now compete with dominant news producers – who in turn have consolidated their online presence (Jenkins, 2006). In civic life online connections have the capacity to take small-scale activism and political engagement to a wider, potentially international public (Castells, 2012). By communicating via the internet and social media platforms, social movements can raise their profile and prompt action among widely dispersed audiences, while politicians and their parties can instantaneously adjust messages based on feedback from citizens, to appeal more convincingly to voters (Dahlberg, 2001; Strömbäck and Kiousis, 2011; Coleman and Price, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2012).

These extensive connections also characterise the way we conduct personal relationships in the digital age, using all sorts of digital platforms to tell people about our lives, stay connected with friends and family, build our networks, access information and otherwise self-promote in ways that would have been unthinkable in the pre-digital age. Digital communication has become deeply embedded in the ways we present ourselves, our activities and our relationships; the personal narratives that populate social media appear authentic: 'open and honest and close to a "true self"' (Lüders, 2008: 697; Senft and Baym, 2015). Digital self-representations can also be a route to speaking politically for or as others, delivering 'authentic accounts of individual "ordinary people" in the context of power-laden social relations' (Thumim, 2012: 4) and potentially contesting existing patterns of discursive and material authority. The public relations industry can take advantage of our use of these very visible connections and platforms in order to both normalise and personalise its persuasive work.

However, there are significant downsides to the digital age, which are marked by tensions that arise from the openness of digital technologies, the ease with which they can be used and the connectedness they offer. These advantages simultaneously generate opportunities for surveillance, control and manipulation of communication and relationships. For organisations, information that previously stayed behind closed doors is now often discoverable online or may be leaked and circulated rapidly and widely, while the openness of digital media threatens the ability to control communication, particularly in crisis situations. In the case of the media, the openness of digital platforms, the ease with which anyone can create content, and increasing competition between popular news sites to attract large audiences and ensure stories travel by audiences liking and sharing them, mean that the line between truth and entertainment can become blurred. This leaves us vulnerable to the circulation of fake and manipulated news on a worrying scale, with the potential to affect the shape of civic and political life (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Levin, 2017).

Even the potential for civic life that digital technologies offer aside from our engagement with media is limited: online activism may not be sustainable in the long term and could undermine more traditional forms of protest (Harlow and Guo, 2014), while the 'echo chamber' effect of the internet, where we tend to search for or hear about events and individuals that we agree with, is exacerbated by the algorithms used in search engine and social media platforms that point us towards content based on our online history and preferences (Barberá et al., 2015; Birchall and Coleman, 2015). This diminishes the opportunities we have to encounter and engage with 'others', or with new perspectives, arguments and information, and thereby prevents the development of an expansive online public sphere.

On a personal level, digital technologies act as a ritualised system of mediated routines (Schroeder and Ling, 2014), and constrain the potential for solidarity with others by prioritising and facilitating some norms of communicative practice over others. As Thumim (2012) notes, self-representations in the digital world are always mediated by their form and function; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat all constrain as well as facilitate what we say, promoting certain types of self-representation over others and pre-empting the connections we make through the algorithms that deliver our information feeds.

From a commercial perspective, the more we use digital platforms, the more we enable the monitoring, analysis and commercialisation of our communication because the habits of our daily life are revealed with every key we press or screen we swipe. For those who want to understand or control our activities, the data they obtain from our engagement with social media, online shopping, web browsing and information searching provide a goldmine of information that allows them to 'know' us through our online activity, often without our knowledge (Turow, 2011; Hearn, 2017). Organisations monitor and monetise our connections and community-building activities, pushing commerce into previously private spaces and targeting us on our phones, laptops, gaming machines and other devices (Andrejevic, 2002). State surveillance is also on the increase, justified by a 'war on terror' where the online world is presented as a location for radicalisation and a source of dangerous connections rather than of community life (Amoore, 2009).

In the context of socio-cultural research on public relations, the digital age raises questions about the role played by the occupation both in facilitating the advantages of digital technologies for individuals, groups and organisations, and in perpetuating more problematic aspects of the digital age, including datafication, surveillance and the instrumentalisation and marketisation of the private sphere. Included in the contemporary arsenal of public relations are tactics that encourage us to share, like, create or promote content on behalf of clients, integrate data analytics and search engine optimisation, and manipulate algorithms. When these activities are done unreflexively, without concern for our subjugation to data, our vulnerability to surveillance and abuse, or the 'free labour' we offer in the process of engaging online (Terranova, 2000), public relations contributes directly to the disadvantages of the digital age even as it benefits from the community and connectivity it offers. How and why this happens is critical to

understanding public relations' effects on local and global inequalities in contemporary society and culture.

NETWORKED SOCIETIES

Understandings of societies as networks have developed in opposition to theories based on structure and agency, and are a response to the changes in society that have emerged as a result of globalisation, technological change, digitisation and the rise of information economies (Castells, 2000; Benkler, 2006). Network theories focus on the web of interactions between many different kinds of human and non-human social actors (technologies, material resources, channels of communication, discourse and people) that define and direct activities in all aspects of our day-to-day lives (Callon, 1986). For example, networks of actors emerge on a global scale to constitute the global finance industry, the global development industry, the global advertising industry and, of course, the public relations industry. Networks also emerge on a much smaller, local scale – for example, around local schools, community groups, or in work contexts. Networks are fluid and constantly evolving, extending over space and time, but also shrinking time because of the speed of digital technologies that facilitate them (Castells, 2000).

Social and organisational networks are bound together by 'communication networks that process knowledge and thoughts to make and unmake trust, the decisive source of power' (Castells, 2009: 16). Actors program communication networks to ensure they contribute to the 'ideas, visions, projects and frames' (Castells, 2009: 46) that are the principles on which the network is based. Different communication networks expand and compete with others for communicative dominance, and as they intersect, the points of contact generate constant change and opportunities for new connections. Thus, networks evolve through a process 'by which conscious social actors of multiple origins bring their resources and beliefs to others, expecting in return to receive the same, and even more: the sharing of a diverse world, thus ending the ancestral fear of the other' (Castells, 2009: 38).

By definition, networks are contingent and emerging because all actors are constantly engaged in some form of action that influences the network. Agency is relational, and structure (conceptualised as the organisation and logic of the network) continually evolves; networked power is therefore diffuse and fluid. Actors can only become powerful by co-opting other actors in a network, but such situations cannot last because of the constant activity that characterises networks (Latour, 2005). Nonetheless, two nodal positions are particularly important in networks: programmers, which define the internal purpose and parameters of the network, and switchers, which facilitate communication between networks by sharing resources and promoting strategic co-operation. Programmers and switchers can be any actor that facilitates action: an individual, organisation, technology, culture, or even another network (Castells, 2009). In addition, some network actors serve as 'centres of calculation', or locations for the accumulation and distribution of

information in a stable form (for example, in the world of higher education, degree programmes, textbooks and highly cited scholars might serve this function). As this 'inscribed' information circulates and becomes embedded in the network, it transforms into knowledge that eventually becomes 'black-boxed' – normative and taken for granted as fact (Latour, 2005).

The optimistic view of networked societies is that they create opportunities for social connection and a greater capacity for social change (Benkler, 2006). Network analyses certainly reveal spaces where individuals and groups come together to resist the deterministic power of structural norms and work with others to pursue change. While these activities can scale up to be important social movements (for example, the Indignados movement, or the anti-globalisation movement that has emerged from protests at the 1999 World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference in Seattle: see Juris, 2005; Anduiza et al., 2014), there are questions about how they can generate lasting changes in governance (Couldry, 2012). Networks may be always 'underway', but they are also constructed from pre-existing hierarchies, where some actors have more power than others to occupy powerful nodal positions – large corporations, for example, are more likely to be able to act as programmers than small companies (Castells, 2009). Challenging this kind of institutionalised power is an ongoing struggle. As Benkler (2006) notes, the potential for networked societies to offer liberation ultimately depends on the choices we make about how to implement and control the new technologies that underpin so much of our networked interactions.

Networked analyses of communication and of society as a whole broaden the scope of public relations theory significantly, because they require us to take a step back from traditional approaches analysing what practitioners or organisations do, to explore *why* they are able to do what they do. How public relations works and the effects it has are reconceived as a result of the associations between all kinds of different actors, always contingent on the specific circumstances in which they emerge. Audiences, practitioners and organisations can be understood as complex clusters of actors rather than single entities, including not only people, but also the technologies, capabilities and networks those people access as well as the knowledge they have about relevant issues and the resources they draw on to act. Network analyses also reveal the important roles practitioners can play as programmers and switchers and help to explain why public relations discourses disperse across society in unpredictable ways (Somerville, 1999). Public relations may be understood as an attempt to program networks by framing communication in particular ways, but practitioners may also be switchers, creating connections between networks as they communicate with different audiences. Network analyses are also helpful in illustrating the way that the public relations industry, with its clusters of practitioners, technologies, social networks and media access, can be a centre of calculation in a network (Schölzel and Nothhaft, 2016), normalising particular forms of knowledge that become black-boxed and exert a powerful influence on network logic.

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STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Structure, agency, identity, collective living and social change all provide ways of understanding the environmental conditions in which the five assumptions of socio-cultural research on public relations are realised. Treating them as separate entities is somewhat misleading, in so far as our experience of them is not parcelled up into separate moments. They are deeply entwined in our day-to-day lives, articulating differently in different social, cultural, political and economic circumstances, and their influence is composite rather than discrete. Correspondingly, there are no definitive answers to questions about the relationship that public relations has with each of them. Their complexity inevitably generates multiple avenues for exploring the mutual influence between them and the public relations industry, its practices and practitioners. They provide an ongoing challenge for public relations researchers interested in socio-cultural analyses and offer many different starting points for theoretical and empirical work, some of which are explored in the course of this book.

In each chapter I address a dimension of social and cultural life that has attracted some attention from public relations scholars, but is under-researched. The aim is to reflect on what is known about public relations in these areas, but also to provide new analyses that will generate an impetus for innovative research in the field. I begin by focusing in Chapter 2 on promotional cultures, carving out an understanding of the role that public relations has in the promotional practices that permeate all our lives. Chapter 3 focuses on the discursive dimensions of social life, and the inherent nature of public relations as a politically significant communicative intervention in social and cultural arrangements. In Chapter 4, I draw on political economic theory to explore how the distribution of power and wealth across the globe both shapes and is shaped by public relations. The complex reality of public relations work in deliberative democracy is the focus of Chapters 5 and 6, which engage with deliberative systems and the public sphere to explore how we might imagine public relations as a productive (though not always positive) democratic force.

Globalisation is addressed in Chapter 7, where I consider how public relations contributes to both the hegemonic dynamics of globalisation and to pockets of resistance, opportunity and change. In Chapter 8, the focus moves on to an examination of the occupational field and its narratives, structures and cultures, to consider how the imperative to survive shapes the ways that public relations is framed and legitimised both to its own practitioners and to the clients and audiences that it serves. The inequalities of race, class and gender that haunt public relations are the focus in Chapters 9 and 10, which provide a critical analysis of their connection to deeper social stratifications that mark many different areas of life, as well as new ways of understanding their effects. Finally, the vexed question of ethics is tackled in Chapter 11, with a new approach to a topic that continues to challenge public relations despite decades of scholarly engagement.

In concluding, I bring together in Chapter 12 some of the insights from the previous chapters to consider the opportunities and challenges for scholars working in this area. The beauty, and the difficulty, of socio-cultural research on public relations is that it is always a project underway, with many more questions to ask than can be answered. I reflect on the potential breadth and depth that this kind of scholarship can achieve; pursued at scale, by enough researchers, socio-cultural work in public relations has the capacity to transform the current academic field.

NOTES

1. The idea of a socio-cultural 'turn' suggests that socio-cultural analyses of public relations are relatively new, but in fact, since the earliest days of public relations scholarship there has been work on the relationship between public relations and its social context, including studies on gender, race, rhetorical and communitarian analyses and critical studies (see Edwards, 2016a, for a longer discussion of the history of critical public relations research, which covers some of this development). While functional and quantitative work still proliferates in the contemporary field, alternative perspectives are now well established, driving public relations research in many new directions. It is this more balanced pattern of scholarship that Caroline Hodges and I designated the socio-cultural 'turn' and has given rise to this book.
2. See Edwards (2012a: 16–20) for a discussion of assumptions 1, 2, 4 and 5.
3. I use scare quotes around the word 'race' to indicate that it is a fluid, socially constructed category, rather than an objective term or an absolute reality. This is the understanding of race that applied throughout the book.
4. 'Cisgender' describes people whose gender identity is the same as their sex at birth.