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### Public Relations in a Global Context: The Relevance of Critical Modernism as a Theoretical Lens

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# Public Relations in a Global Context: The Relevance of Critical Modernism as a Theoretical Lens

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This article aims to interrupt the modernist goals of public relations research that predominantly privileges a management discourse. The emergence of the intertwined nature of cultural phenomena in the context of globalization necessitates alternative ways of thinking about public relations. This article explores the possibilities of postmodernism to disrupt the accepted norms of the dominant discourse of public relations. However, given the fragmented nature of the discursive space in postmodernism, this article advances the argument that critical modernism provides a relevant alternative to the modernist paradigm of public relations research by utilizing globalization theories. It suggests a space for articulating the roles of power and structure situated within the constitutive spaces of discourse.

The foundation of the World Trade Organization in the 1990s, accompanied by the formation of the many regional and trans-region blocs such as North American Free-Trade Agreement, The European Union, Asia Pacific Economic Corporation, and Asia–Europe Meeting, marked the decade as the harbinger of globalization, reflected in significant increases in cross-national trading and communication (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). Globalization as a cultural phenomenon is marked by the complex diffusion of ideas, information, capital and people across national boundaries, entangling the local and the global, deterritorializing and reterritorializing national cultures (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 2000), and making individuals aware of the multiple possibilities of the small stories or-

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ganized within the local conditions of knowledge production (Bardhan, 2003; Lyotard, 1984). Current theorizing and practice of public relations are located in the realm of these highly complex and intertwined processes of global flows of ideas, images, information, commodities, finances, and people across national boundaries (Appadurai, 1990; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003); furthermore, these global fragmentations of meta-narratives have sensitized contemporary conceptualizations of public relations to the postmodern turn in theorizing (Bardhan, 2003; Gower, 2006).

With the “disappearance of time and space as materialized and tangible dimensions to social life,” it has become necessary for public relations practitioners to communicate with stakeholder groups that are not demarcated into clearly identifiable spatial and temporal positions (Harvey, 2000, p. 84). Transnational corporations have replaced nation-states in infusing mass impact as central producers and distributors of cultural globalization, and the practice of public relations has emerged as the central player in the manufacturing and exchange of global images and identities constituted in the realm of global policies (Held & McGrew, 2000). Acknowledging this interconnectivity between the changing terrain of public relations and globalization, Gower (2006) issued a call for critical/cultural theorists in the discipline to examine public relations in the backdrop of globalization processes, attending to issues of integration, power, multinational corporations and democracy. This article responds to this call by putting forth the concept of *critical modernism* as a theoretical lens for interrogating public relations in a global landscape (Mumby & Deetz, 1990), and for examining both the modern and postmodern elements of public relations theory and practice in the realm of globalization. In doing so, it locates current postmodern (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2000) and critical (Motion & Weaver, 2005) debates in public relations scholarship within the broader framework of globalization theories (Appadurai, 1990). Whereas the thrust of postmodernism in public relations is on interrogating and radically challenging the very notion of “a truth” and focusing on what counts as context-bound knowledge (Mumby, 1997), critical theory emphasizes the social structures, political processes, economic interests and ideologies through which knowledge is articulated and practiced (Mumby, 1997). Whereas, on one hand, globalization has fundamentally disrupted the notion of *master narratives* by drawing attention to the fragmented nature of communication and information flow, it has simultaneously brought society face-to-face with the necessity to theorize about the interplay of power and control through which transnational hegemony shapes policies and influences local and global actions.

Critical modernism aligns itself with postmodernism by approaching knowledge as socially constructed in the realms of social, economic, and political contexts, and simultaneously takes up a critical stance by interrogating the deep-seated structures underlying the communicative practices in a global context

(Mumby, 1997; Mumby & Deetz, 1990). On one hand, it sensitizes current theorizing of public relations to the intertwined flows of identities, ethnicities, information, technologies, media, commodities, and ideas by locating them within a richly descriptive context; on the other hand, it opens up a space for articulating the roles of power, structure, and agency situated in the realm of these intertwined and dynamic flows of identities, ethnicities, information, technologies, media, commodities, and ideas. It has the potential to deconstruct the capitalist ideology that informs both theory and practice, where scholars and practitioners systematically maintain and produce knowledge and practices to sustain the ideology (Weaver, Motion, & Roper, 2006). With the emphasis to promote the field as a management function (Gower, 2006), the roles of public relations practitioners as part of dominant coalition have been studied traditionally to develop theories. Hence, the purpose of advancing critical modernism as an alternative paradigm is twofold. Not only does it challenge the corporate logic and the capitalist base of public relations research and practice, it also expands the theoretical base for addressing the complexities that have emerged in the process of globalization.

We begin this article by analyzing public relations practice through the lens of globalization theories, accompanied by a discussion of the concepts of power, ideology, and hegemony in the backdrop of globalization theories. Key globalization concepts discussed in the next section offer the foundation for theorizing the dialectical tensions inherent in the practice of public relations in the current global order. These dialectical tensions further disrupt the discourses of universal utilitarian rationality that have dominated much of the functional scholarship and practice of public relations (Durham, 2005), and open up spaces for raising questions of power, ideology and hegemony as they are locally constituted within the parameters of global structures. The discussion of the globalization theories is followed by a brief conceptual overview of the modernist, postmodern, and critical approaches to public relations as a stage for setting up a framework for critical modernism as a theoretical lens for understanding public relations in the realm of globalization.

## GLOBALIZATION THEORIES

Key theoretical works on globalization articulate the following phenomena: local–global tensions in communicative processes (Bhabha, 1994; Giddens, 2000), time–space compression achieved through continuously evolving new communication technologies (Harvey, 2000), and the intertwined flows of people, media, technologies, finances, and ideas in the global landscape (Appadurai, 1990); each of these concepts has important theoretical implications for public relations scholarship.

## The Local And The Global

Giddens (2000) suggested that the local and the global are simultaneously connected, the local is articulated in the realm of the global, and the global presents itself in the discursive enunciations made in the local context. For instance, the lives of medicinal herb farmers in the Brazilian Amazon are significantly and fundamentally impacted by global policies (such as the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs) that are directly impacted by the actions of global organizations such as the World Bank and transnational corporations, and local elite actors that implement these policies. Drawing attention to the rapidly stretching time–space distance that connects local involvements with interactions across distance, Giddens suggested that “local happenings in the present era are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (p. 92). For example, the framing of issues related to health and wellbeing in the United States impacts the funding priorities of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which in turn, impacts the implementations of health programs and interventions in distant local contexts of the South (such as a rural community in Nepal).

The logic of instrumental rationality driving public relations practice based on universal appeal to reason has been disrupted by this very dialectical tension between the local and the global as the concept of what constitutes *universal* has come under scrutiny in the backdrop of the locally situated practices of public relations (Holtzhausen, 2002; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). The knowledge of local practices presented in the global context has undermined the basic foundations of public relations theorizing based on Eurocentric notions of what constitutes as public relations. Similarly, the objectives of global public relations efforts such as the efforts of the World Bank and the United Nations have come under scrutiny through the articulation of voices of communities that have hitherto been situated in the margins of dominant public relations work.

The local–global tension has opened up a space for examining alternative functions of public relations beyond serving the agendas of powerful organizations. For instance, most existing public relations theories are embedded in the modernist philosophy of privileging managerial discourse and are developed within the context of public relations as a management function for organizations; this management function has come under scrutiny based on locally-enunciated knowledge of public relations outside the realm of corporate logic and more so in the realm of activism and community empowerment (Holtzhausen, 2001). Describing the management function of public relations, Dozier and Ehling (1992) pointed out that “once a public relations practitioner identifies the strategic publics for which communication programs are necessary, he or she should practice public relations by objectives to maximize the success of those programs and their contribution to the

long-term effectiveness of the organization” (p. 159). In this approach, public relations practices unquestioningly follow certain roles as normative, given, and absolute and are evaluated in terms of economic gains and rationality (Holtzhausen, 2001). As Holtzhausen argued, this has encouraged development of concepts such as “strategic message design, management of culture, and total quality management” (p. 252) and theories on “covering laws, systems approaches and an emphasis on skills development, particularly in the areas of communication and management” (p. 252). Inherent in the conceptualization of the management function is the rational discourse of bureaucracy, based on the notion that there exists a set of strategies and tactics that are effective and efficient, simultaneously limiting alternative possibilities that might be explored on the basis of alternative criteria that are not informed by the managerial emphasis on profits, effectiveness, and efficiency but instead by values such as social justice, equality, and community empowerment. This monolithic emphasis on managerial discourse has come under scrutiny as (a) activist groups have grown locally and globally, harnessing the community building roles of new media technologies to create a global presence, and (b) more and more public relations scholars in international contexts have started exploring the relationship building strategies used by these activist groups (Demetrious, 2006). The mobilization of local issues in the global arena challenges the modernist discourse of organizational management, and suggests alternative entry points for the articulation of alternative voices on key issues that have typically been played out by powerful social actors (Dutta & Pal, in press).

Furthermore, the global–local dialectic has also displaced the very conceptualization of publics in public relations scholarship. Contesting the *etic* approach to public relations scholarship that dominated the field, public relations scholars have called for critical inquiries and nontraditional methodologies that explore locally situated styles of public relations practice (Bardhan, 2003; Pratt, 1985; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2001). Publics can no longer be defined within the realm of nation-states, as the very notion of nation-states has come under scrutiny in the global landscape (Chatterjee, 1986). The global–local tension has disrupted the traditional notion of geographically situated audiences contained within isolated national boundaries and identified by a set of permanent characteristics. Concepts such as individualism–collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and masculinity–femininity that defined the parameters for cross-cultural comparisons in public relations research need to be scrutinized in the face of these increasingly complex understandings of global identities enacted in contextually-embedded interactions. How meaningful is it to compare the public relations practices of cultures in terms of the dimension of individualism and collectivism when the very notion of individualism–collectivism is contested in the realm of concepts such as *hybridity*? How meaningful are dominant categorization schemes that seek to extract cultural characteristics for the purposes of constructing large-scale compari-

sons in the face of emerging concepts such as fragmented and contested identities that are dynamic? The local–global interplay has fundamentally unseated the notion that public relations practices of nations can be captured, compared and evaluated in large-scale studies that seek to articulate master narratives of public relations practice. It ultimately suggests that the very search for nationally-defined notions of public relations practice perhaps is counterintuitive in a global scenario where local practices are fragmented yet interconnected with global processes. From a critical standpoint, the interrogation of “fixed” notions of publics has led to questions such as: “How are local publics conceptualized by global organizations?” “How do certain conceptualizations of publics serve the interests of dominant social actors?” “How do these conceptualizations reflect the interests of dominant social actors, and how do global public relations strategies and tactics maintain power and control over local actors?” In other words, the very attempt to “fix” local identities by global actors perhaps serves the public relations task of justifying the communicative control of elite actors.

Also, issues are no longer situated within locally isolated spaces, but rather are interconnected globally with global processes (Smith, 1997). The local is impacted by events that happen in the realm of the global, and simultaneously influences the processes that continue to take place globally. Local issues and the possibilities for how these issues translate into practices are impacted by the global policies in the realm of which they are situated. For instance, the framing of policies related to the pharmaceutical industry in the local realm is impacted by the articulation and implementation of health policies in the global arena that govern the innovation, dissemination, and use of health products. Critical public relations scholars might explore the ways in which the public relations strategies of powerful global actors influence global and local policies, and the lives of locally situated publics. Furthermore, critical scholarship might interrogate the ways in which the framing of global issues is influenced by the flow of power and control in the realm of globalization. Specifically, in the area of public policies and the construction of global risks, it would be worthwhile to examine the global processes through which these risks are constituted and policies that are developed to control, manage, and evaluate them. The risk of HIV/AIDS in India is relevant and critical for publics in a Midwestern community in rural Wisconsin because of the global networks that seamlessly connect geographically dispersed local communities; in other words, the risks of HIV/AIDS in India are intertwined with the risks of the disease in local U.S. communities as transnational flows of economic and human resources connect these communities into seamless webs of material, human, and communicative resources. How this risk is framed and how policy is constructed around this risk is critical to the allocation of valuable resources. For public relations practitioners, this has brought about the relevance of communicating with globally dispersed publics that are situated locally and yet connected globally through sets of issues that offer the substratum for their cohesiveness. For example,

global HIV/AIDS activist groups have emerged that mobilize locally, as well as globally, to shape global HIV/AIDS policies. This suggests the relevance for engaging in globally situated issues management that is sensitized to the continuous interpenetration of the local and the global. From a critical standpoint, this suggests the importance of interrogating the global power structures within which issues are framed and policies are managed. This local–global interflow in globalization processes is accompanied by time–space compression in global organizations, and the complex interplay among the various *scapes* of social life within which the human experience is organized.

### Time–Space Compression and Scapes

One of the aspects of globalization has been time–space compression that has disrupted and disoriented political–economic practices, as well as cultural and social life (Harvey, 2000). Harvey posited that accelerating turnover time of production, coupled with faster exchanges and consumption, outsourcing and sub-contracting, and improved systems of techniques of distribution, have “accentuated volatility and ephemerality of fashion, production, techniques, labour processes, ideas and ideologies, values and established practices” (p. 83). Harvey suggested that more situations now emerge in any given time, implying profound changes in human experiences and creating a temporality in public value systems. This time–space compression underscores the complexity of global processes within which the practice of public relations is situated. Strategies and tactics of public relations employed by organizations in the global landscape are embedded in this complex interplay of identities, mediated communications, technology flows, economic flows, and flow of ideas. In the realm of critical scholarship, the complex interplay of time and space has drawn attention to the complexity of the layers within which the practice of public relations is situated. Power is played out through interactions of multiple stakeholders that are situated both locally and globally, and the thrust of critical public relations scholarship becomes the interplay among these stakeholders through which they maintain their hegemony over the local and global discursive spaces and global material resources.

Reflecting upon this complexity of global processes, Appadurai (1990) wrote, “the new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” (p. 230). He offers five dimensions of global cultural flow—*ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technospaces*, *finanscapes*, and *ideoscapes*. Ethnoscape essentially consists of diasporic community moving in a fluid world constituted in the realm of the politics of nations. This global flow of diasporic communities is central to the ways in which organizations conceptualize their internal and external stakeholders, and the ways in which they communicate with these stakeholders. For instance, the offshoring of jobs in Southern nations, the flow of technology-based expertise across nation-states, and the fluid movement

of knowledge managers across national boundaries critically influences the ways in which organizations develop policies, implement such policies, and communicate about such policies. One such example is the Indian call center. The cost-reduction logic drives companies from mostly the United States and United Kingdom to offshore voice services, from countries such as India, that requires Indian call center employees to interact effectively with distant customers. This creates recruitment and training challenges of a different kind that have to ensure fluency and clarity of English and depth of cultural understanding among the call center employees (Pal & Buzzanell, in press; Taylor & Bain, 2005). Similarly, the idea of ethnoscape also suggests that organizational communication with external stakeholders is continually fragmented and interwoven across multiple spaces. The flow of diasporic communities in global spaces also captures the displacement of such communities in the realm of global organizations and the ways in which they operate; this creates openings for critical public relations scholars for exploring the ways in which locally situated communities of the South are displaced and dislocated in the realm of the politics of global capital flow.

*Technoscape* refers to the fluidity of technology that makes tangible and intangible knowledge flows possible across boundaries. For public relations practice, this possibility of knowledge flow across boundaries significantly impacts the ways in which information is crafted and targeted toward various publics. For instance, the growth in the reach and the penetration of the Internet has fostered new challenges for public relations practitioners regarding the ways in which practitioners communicate with their publics within the rich intersections of time and space. The use of the Internet as a medium for exchange of information globally within short time frames suggests that, during a crisis, an organization might need to communicate with geographically dispersed publics pretty rapidly. From a critical standpoint, the mobilizing power of the Internet in organizing local communities into global platforms has opened up possibilities for exploring the emancipatory role of public relations. Critical public relations scholars may examine the ways in which technology serves as a site of contestation and framing of global issues, and the processes through which power and ideology are played out through technologically-mediated sites.

*Finanscape* refers to the interlinkage of capital with monetary and commodity flows across boundaries, and provides an opening for challenging the political economy of public relations practice in the context of globalization. The practice of public relations conceptualized within the dominant framework of managerial utilitarianism takes for granted the economic functions served by powerful social actors. From a critical standpoint, the concept of finanscape offers a theoretical lens for examining the complex interflow of economic interests and the political processes through which these economic interests are played out in the global arena. In doing so, it takes discussions of political economy from beyond the realm of locally situated actors and relationships into the realm of complexly intercon-

nected webs of global actors situated both locally and globally. For example, a criticism of the public relations strategies used by Nike with respect to the sweatshop issue may be looked at through a political economic lens that interrogates the financial interests of the various stakeholders at the local and global levels.

Mediascape carries the information across borders, providing images that depend on several interests of global actors. From a critical public relations standpoint, scholarship may explore the ways in which global media ownership patterns interplay with the public relations messages of transnational corporations, and the connections between powerful global actors and the access to media agenda setting and issue framing secured by public relations practitioners. Locating critical analyses of public relations practices within the broader criticism of media ownership patterns would inform current understanding of the relationship between public relations and media conglomerates in the context of globalization. *Ideoscape* refers to the conflict of ideologies that are often directly political and in conflict with the ideologies of nation-states. In the realm of ideologies, a critical approach examines the contestation of ideologies and the hegemonic processes through which certain ideologies are privileged over other ideologies in global discursive framing and implementation of global policies. Ultimately, ideoscapes provides a link into the interrogation of the intricately complex processes through which multiple local and global actors interact to shape communicative practices. Within these dimensions, the practices of public relations negotiate the complex interchange among ethnoscaping, mediascaping, technoscapes, finanscaping, and ideoscapes. Therefore, a critical perspective informed by globalization theory is aware of the contextually-located nature of public relations theorizing, and is simultaneously sensitized to the necessity of theorizing about the roles of powerful actors in legitimizing certain issues and delegitimizing other ones.

In summary, the global shift, associated with the creation of world markets and with international communication and media flows, has profound implications for the way people make sense of their lives and of the changing world: "It is provoking new senses of disorientation and of orientation, giving rise to new experiences of both placeless and placed identity" (Robins, 2000, p. 198). In essence, most of the globalization theories explain globalization in terms of diversity and difference, rather than in terms of homogenization. It is within this simultaneity of diversity and difference that is at once situated and displaced that public relations theorists and practitioners must locate a set of practices that are meaningful to the publics. National identities are no longer marked by simplistic concepts, such as collectivism and individualism, that offer polar opposites to locate national cultures based on the notion of static cultures that can be delimited within the geographical definitions of nation-states. Cultures exist in continuous flux, continuously interpreted and reinterpreted through human interactions, and embedded within the context of the lives of the members of the cultures. Culture is both a carrier of traditions and a site of transformation. It is within this dialectical tension be-

tween tradition and transformation that identities and relationships become meaningful, suggesting the necessity of conceptualizing public relations within an organic framework of evolving relationships rather than within a simplistic modernist frame that seeks to develop the best strategy for a national culture based on predefined markers such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity.

The “complex interplay of economic and cultural dynamics” (Robins, 2000, p. 201) necessitates an understanding of its implications for public relations research. For instance, all the scapes enumerated by Appadurai (1990) demonstrate that public consciousness no longer stretches across national spaces, but “ignite the micro-politics of a nation-state” (Robins, 2000, p. 236). Hence, what are the challenges for public relations research in view of the complex global shifts? For instance, it seems issues are likely to be more predominant than policies in the process of globalization, characterized by uncertainty and temporality of these issues as they get discussed within multiple contexts. Given the distinction between issues and policies in public relations literature, it seems possible that issue managers may have to largely cope with ever-changing issues in the context of globalization, rather than policies that are straightforward and narrowly defined within the strict boundaries of civil society norms as defined by dominant actors. Because policies are defined as “formulation of answers to current and critical issues” (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985, p. 7), policy-making situations, the way they are currently defined, seem inconsistent with postmodern conditions of globalization. Policies also need to be viewed as ongoing answers rather than as definite resolutions, a modernist concept. It also becomes necessary to introduce the postmodern idea of global public in public relations at the crossroads of “immediacy and intensity of global cultural confrontations” (Robins, 2000, p. 198), rather than the modernist expectation of “continuity and historicity of identity” (p. 198). As Harvey (2000) observed, globalization has particular bearing on postmodern thinking that necessitates theorizing in new directions. Critical modernism provides an entry point for such theorizing as it navigates the tensions between postmodernism and critical theory. To set up a stage for this discussion of critical modernism, we now briefly discuss the rich body of literature in public relations that embody the modernist, postmodern, and critical approaches.

### MODERNIST, POSTMODERN AND CRITICAL APPROACHES

The objective of this section is to locate the modernist, postmodern, and critical strands in public relations scholarship as a way to set up the stage for critical modernism. In doing so, this section demonstrates the necessity of critical modernism

as a theoretical lens for understanding the globalization processes articulated in the realm of the globalization theories reviewed previously.

### Modernist Approach

In the modernist approach to public relations, communication is evaluated in terms of its effectiveness, and questions of ethics and values are taken for granted (Mumby, 1997). Modern organizations favor centralized authority and hierarchy, focus on mass markets and consistent goals, follow bureaucratic structures and standardized structures of reward and punishments, and favor unity and similarity and a coherent culture. In the modernist approach, publics have been traditionally constituted in deeply static and coherent forms based on predefined identifiers, and communication practices with such publics have been defined in terms of the persuasive agendas of organizations defined by broadly defined classifiers of national cultures that are no longer relevant in the current global landscape of dispersed and fragmented identities.

Thus, "a unitary view of organizations" (Putnam, 1983, p. 36) gets perpetuated as the normal view of the organization, legitimized as the sole criterion for measuring the organization. Conceptualization of organizational members gets reduced to individuals who are rational agents and instruments for improving organizational efficiency. In the same vein, conceptualization of publics and possible situations gets categorized into certain classifications that are predefined, based on markers deemed relevant by practitioners; here publics primarily serve as fixed audiences of public relations campaigns. For instance, J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) provide a conceptual framework for the practice of public relations and a set of technical communication skills needed to practice public relations. This gets reinforced with Hallahan's (2000) typology of publics that includes aware, active, inactive, aroused, and nonpublics and J. E. Grunig's (1989) four models of public relations encompassing press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical, which represent values, goals, and behaviors held by organizations in their public relations practices. In other words, organizations are viewed as using these normative guidelines depending on the classification of publics and situations. The dominant ideology of these classifications is, thus, driven by modernist rationality that views the social, psychological, and economic characteristics as "static properties rather than social processes" that are continuously negotiated through interactions (Putnam, 1983, p. 36). Organizations and publics become monolithic entities, where cultural differences are overlooked and standardized through dominant ideologies of the Western paradigm. For instance, the widely circulated criteria of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, and masculinity/femininity are located within the Western paradigm of what constitutes legitimate criteria for categorizing cultures. The modern-

ist approach to public relations has been critiqued from both the postmodern and critical approaches (Gower, 2006).

### Postmodern Approach

As articulated earlier in this article, postmodernism rejects the notion of grand theory and the traditional Cartesian–Kantian conceptions of reason. Arguing against its universality, postmodernism posits that what counts as reason depends on action at a given time and space (Stewart, 1991). In other words, rationality is context bound and is situated within the meaning-making practices that constitute it. Breaking away from the “three c’s: closure, certainty, and control” (Stewart, 1991, p. 356), postmodern philosophy celebrates the significance of context and favors “[responses] to questions over [answers]” (p. 356). Recognizing local and situated experiences, postmodernism draws attention to “paradox, ambiguity, uncertainty, emergence and difference” (Taylor, 2000, p. 118). Mumby (1997) regarded the phenomenon as a “discourse of vulnerability” (p. 14) that views the subject as having been constructed through discursive practices rather than a subject with “certain autonomy and coherence” (p. 14). Practices within public relations that are considered the accepted practices become open to alternative articulations, alternative meanings, and alternative interpretations. The contexts of the publics engaged in the relationship become salient in postmodern theory with an emphasis on the notion that the meanings within the relationships are context-bound, and not simply located within the objectives, strategies, and tactics of campaign developers.

A postmodern approach locates public relations as an “institutional process” (Holtzhausen, 2001, p. 253), where individuals negotiate their goals and values to achieve a common direction. Postmodernism raises questions that offer opportunities for different theoretical voices to emerge (Calas & Smircich, 1999; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997). Celebrating multiplicity and difference, postmodernism not only provides an alternate way of thinking about public relations but also rejects some of the modernist expectations of public relations practice. Drawing from Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault, among others, Holtzhausen argued that revealing the links between knowledge and power, postmodernism has the potential to challenge the emphasis on public relations as a management function and demonstrate the role of the public relations practitioner as part of the “dominant coalition” (p. 254). Instead, it offers openings for exploring the goals of public relations scholarship and the functions served by the very practice of public relations.

With its emphasis on language that is indeterminate, postmodernism has the promise to add to public relations new dimensions that recognize relationships, cultural identity, and voices (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Extending the postmodern argument about language as a social event to public relations benefits both the public and organizations. Viewing human thoughts and ideas as living events resulting from dialogic encounters (Stewart, 1991), public relations practice can be inclu-

sive of voices rather than standardizing human experiences and normalizing possible situations with the goal of rational decision-making. Acknowledging human identity as relational and communication as contextual and cultural (Stewart, 1991), postmodernism brings to the fore the importance of relationship and dialogue in public relations. Such an approach no longer limits public relations to the realm of strategies aimed at manipulating and controlling organizational environment by predicting publics' behavior and developing situational models to improve the corporate bottom-line. Moving away from the persuasive emphasis of traditional public relations scholarship, postmodern public relations offers openings for listening to the voices of the multiple publics that are complexly layered within and outside the organization. For example, Holtzhausen's (2002) postmodern analysis of discourse of 16 public relations practitioners demonstrated how they valued the situational and local nature of ethical decision making. Moving away from organizational norms and making sense of the local can become possible only by listening.

Moving away from "essentialist and universalist understanding" (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 265) allows public relations practitioners to recognize the "new forms of cultural practices that are being defined globally" (p. 266) in the context of the connections between time, space, and culture that are continuously being unsettled in the context of globalization. As articulated earlier, postmodern thought is particularly important in the transnational context that is creating global publics that are no longer conceptualized in terms of territorially defined nation-state boundaries. With rapid exchanges of ideas and information and migration of people across borders, the idea of culture is no longer restricted within a rigid set of bound constructs. The global publics need to be understood in terms of their lived experiences, where the referents of their cultural, ethnic, and national labels are not uniform, but fluid and heterogeneous (Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002). Whereas literature on activism recognizes the complex formation of global activist publics, such theorizations have been inadequate in public relations literature. For instance, Routledge (2000) enumerated the "globalized local actions that are political initiatives which take place either at the same or different times, in different locations across the globe...and localized global actions" (p. 27). In other words, Routledge (2000) examined the "global consciousness" (p. 27) in the context of fluid concepts of time and space, whereby place-specific struggles are engaged with alliances and collaborations across boundaries. In other words, a regional activist movement revolving around a local issue does not remain restricted to the specific place. It mobilizes allies for its struggle globally. Worth noting here is the notion of temporality of struggle and resistances that take diverse forms and move in different dimensions and scales, thus creating unexpected networks, connections, and possibilities within the global landscape.

In the same vein, as articulated in the context of the globalization theories, it is necessary for public relations research to recognize the notion of global publics

with multiple fluid attachments and the micropolitics of issues that come with it. In understanding cultural pluralism and the different forms of relationships and situations, as informed by the aforementioned globalization theories, it becomes necessary for public relations research to address the dynamism of cultural implications in the global cultural economy, and the transformative nature of cultures in the global flow of ideas, capital, and commodities. A postmodern inquiry thwarts the idea of closure, and instead always creates openings for multiple possibilities, with room for alternatives to dominant discourses that seek to systematically locate the theory and practice of public relations. Closures can be doors opening onto other closures (Minh-Ha, 1991) as opposed to the idea of sealing off a grand theory. Moreover, embracing the postmodern framework makes researchers and practitioners wary of imposing a set of monolithic Western expectations and values that can be seen as tools of cultural imperialism, a phenomenon often overlooked in modernist practices of public relations.

### Critical Approach

The goal of critical scholarship in public relations is to examine the ways in which the theorizing and practice of public relations serves the interests of dominant social actors. In doing so, this line of scholarship interrogates the ideology of public relations and the underlying economic interests served by this ideology. Public relations is located in the realm of capitalism and interrogated in the context of the role it serves as a tool for the management of capitalist functions. Fundamentally critical theory examines alternative communication practices that allow greater democracy among stakeholders through reconsidering organizational governance and decision-making processes (Deetz, 2005). Deetz claimed that critical theory shows how modernism subordinates social life to technological rationality, protecting a dominant group's interest. Hence, a critical lens in public relations has the potential to uncover the dominant interest that it fulfils and offer alternatives to this dominant lens. The purpose of public relations in the Western world is maintaining the dominant capitalist interest and is, hence, a product of modernism and capitalism (Holtzhausen, 2000).

Critical theorists argue that the role of public relations is maintaining the organizations' position of power and control within social systems (Motion & Weaver, 2005). These scholars also question the dominant normative theoretical paradigm in public relations for the ways in which it criticizes Western capitalism (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). For instance, interrogating the role of public relations as an ideological enterprise, Berger (1999) drew attention to the ways in which the practice of public relations serves the interests of dominant actors within social systems. Critiquing dominant models of public relations such as the two-way symmetrical model, critical scholars point out that such a model assumes organizations and

publics have equal power, skills, and resources to represent themselves in the public discourse (Curtin & Gaither, 2005).

Critical public relations scholars examine the deep-seated structures that underlie the practice of public relations. In doing so, they structurally situate public relations in the realm of broader social relationships and the distribution of power within social systems. Questions such as “Who has access to public relations opportunities?” “Who is/are served by public relations practitioners?” “Whose interests are represented by public relations practitioners?” and “Who is silenced?” shed further light on the practice of public relations and the ways in which it participates in marginalizing the underserved segments of the population, while simultaneously managing the interests of the dominant social actors.

Although critical theory provides an entry point for meaningfully interrogating the structures surrounding the practice of public relations (Motion & Weaver, 2005), it does not really create and sustain a discursive space for engaging with the voices of stakeholders who are typically marginalized through the dominant practice of public relations. The contextually-situated nature of public relations as articulated in postmodern thought opens up a space for engaging with voices of marginalized communities. Critical modernism engages in this tension between the postmodern and critical approaches by simultaneously critiquing the dominant approach, and offering a space for engaging with the voices of cultural participants through an emphasis on contextually-situated meanings; a critical modernist lens is particularly instructive in the realm of the concepts of local–global relationships, time–space compression, and scapes previously above.

### A FINAL THOUGHT: CRITICAL MODERNISM

As articulated in the section on globalization theories, current practice of public relations is located within several dialectical tensions. One such tension is the relationship between the traditionally modernist values of public relations and the possibility of critical modernism that questions the underlying assumptions of these very modernist values with a goal of illuminating the ideological biases of modernism. The essential challenge in public relations research is twofold. First, the field needs to address the ever-changing issues and global publics in the context of which public relations is practiced. Second, it is necessary for the field to embrace an alternative way of thinking that explores issues of power and ideology and the “processes through which certain realities are privileged over others,” simultaneously creating spaces for marginalized voices that have systematically been displaced from the dominant platforms of public relations (Mumby, 1997, p. 9). Both the concerns call for research to problematize the notion of communication as value neutral. Cooper and Burrell (see, Pieczka 1996) suggest that critical modernism occupies a somewhat ambiguous position and seems to have some redeeming

features in the debate, having interest in language and being opposed to the monolithic treatment of the universe by modernism. Both postmodernism and critical theory interrogate the value-free notions underlying the modernist approach to public relations; however, they diverge in the ways in which they come to engage with modernism. Whereas postmodernism emphasizes the fragmented nature of the discursive space, critical theory seeks to locate the discursive space in discussions of power and structure. As pointed out in the introduction, this article advances the argument that critical modernism negotiates the tensions between modernism and postmodernism by suggesting an alternative where discussions of power and structure are located within the constitutive spaces of discourse, and provides a relevant alternative to the modernist paradigm of public relations research by utilizing tools from globalization theory.

Critical modernism simultaneously interrogates the terrains of power within which discourse is articulated and rearticulated, and creates openings for the articulation of alternative possibilities through the engagement with voices that have traditionally been erased from the discursive space. On one hand, critical modernism disrupts the master narrative of the dominant framework by looking at the fragmented spaces of discourse situated amidst the local–global tensions; on the other hand, it seeks to interrogate the interplay of power and structure in the creation and sustenance of the processes of oppression that marginalize certain sectors of the population. Concerned with domination and resistance, critical modernism believes that surface level meanings and behaviors obscure deep structure conflicts that systematically disrupt the potential of a genuinely democratic society (Mumby, 1997). Particularly relevant is the school of critical modernism that is rooted in neo-Marxism, questioning the deterministic nature of scientific Marxism. Critical modernism, what Mumby called a “discourse of suspicion” (p. 12), has the potential to demonstrate how communicative practices in modernistic realm maintain and produce domination. Its goal is to present reality as undistorted and misrecognized (Deetz, 2005). For instance, Boyd’s (2002) study of out-law discourse is an examination of a “discourse of resistance to established norms of argument” (p. 94). Contrary to in-law discourse that is consistent with normative standards of society, inherent in out-law discourse are “objection and counteranalysis” (p. 95). Exploring the out-law discourse of the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) over the side effects of Procter and Gamble’s fat substitute, Olestra, Boyd argued that the CSPI provided alternatives to established technical conventions of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in creating the regulatory controversy that finally worked toward the benefit of the public. Problematizing the logic of the FDA’s standards and questioning its regulatory approval process, the CSPI challenged the status quo. Olestra finally received the FDA’s approval, but with a number of conditions. In other words, Boyd demonstrated that CSPI’s resistance disrupted the conventional process of decision-making that was serving the corporate interest rather than public interest.

Departing from the modernist realms of scientific, technical, and instrumental reasoning, it is necessary to explore the relationship between communication and the social processes in public relations. Communication is driven by the desire to control, change, and discipline the publics (Foucault, 1977). In this process, certain issues are emphasized, certain problems are framed, and certain solutions are proposed; furthermore, several other problems and solutions are relegated to the background (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Critical modernism raises questions such as: “Whom do public relations serve?” “What interests are privileged and what are the ideological configurations underlying this act of privileging certain actors?” “What are the taken-for-granted assumptions in public relations and how do these assumptions serve the power and control of dominant actors?” Furthermore, critical modernism suggests that these questions simultaneously need to be located in the context of the real voices of real people, by engaging in dialogues that bring forth the meanings as constituted by locally-constituted meaning communities in a global arena.

For instance, applying a critical modernist lens to the global phenomenon of civil society building, Dutta-Bergman (2005) problematized the taken-for-granted ethical questions around the notion of civil society to sensitize public relations practitioners and scholars engaged in civil society initiatives through media relations and community relations activities for the purposes of democracy promotion. In doing so, he examined the deep-seated structures underlying the rhetoric of *democracy promotion*, and simultaneously called for a culture-centered approach that engages with the voices of local communities. Dutta-Bergman argued that civil society projects are traditional one-way modernization projects imposed by the West on the Third World, based fundamentally on agendas of persuasion to serve the interests of dominant actors. He further argued that the public relations literature celebrating the universal value of civil society largely ignores the culturally informed nature of the concept and its location within Western hegemonic interests; in doing so he engaged with the three concepts of global–local tensions, space–time compressions, and scapes. Democracy and civil society, Dutta-Bergman argued, are used as rhetorical tropes to fundamentally serve U.S. interests of creating strategically safe and economically beneficial spaces elsewhere in the globe. In this instance, taking for granted the very notion that democracy is a good thing and a desirable end point for other states justifies the choice of undemocratic interventions in these nation-states, followed by acts of nation building to suit U.S. neo-imperialist interests. Hence, using a lens of critical modernism, Dutta-Bergman made it evident that civil society is a Eurocentric construct loaded with the individualistic biases of European thought, a view that would have been otherwise taken for granted by a modernist approach; his criticism located a global phenomenon in the realm of local contexts.

In addition to the critique of the taken-for-granted assumption of the dominant approach, the celebration of fragmentation and difference is appropriate to exam-

ine the local and ephemeral conditions emerging in the context of globalization. Moreover, the concern with issues of domination and resistance has the potential to introduce a new direction in public relations, promising autonomy and agency to the knowing subject built upon a commitment to listening to subaltern voices. For instance, Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) demonstrated how postmodernism makes it possible to facilitate organizational activism. With a desire for change, practitioners combat normative expectations of their work environment through situational and local decision-making. Hence, considering the more emergent and context-bound idea of knowledge in postmodern perspective, it emphasizes the power relationships with its focus on “the processes through which various discursive struggles occur” (Mumby, 1997, p. 16).

A critical modernist approach to public relations would continuously question the underlying ideology of public relations practice and the powerful actors served by such practice; reflexivity is essential to the process. In reflexively engaging with the examination of the public relations process, a critical modernist analysis in the global landscape uses the conceptual tools of local–global tensions, time–space compression and scapes in simultaneously examining the local contexts within which discourses are constructed and interrogating the broader global power structures within which these processes are embedded.

The role of public relations becomes far more intriguing in the context of globalization where economies are becoming increasingly interconnected and boundaries of publics are getting blurred. It is particularly important to conceive of culture-centered public relations research as mainstream practice unquestioningly imposes the dominant ideology on other cultures; the simultaneous interrogation of the hegemonic configuration of the dominant discourse and the voices of local cultures present opportunities for engaging in scholarship that connects the local with the global. Dutta-Bergman (2006), in his critical examination of entertainment–education (E–E) campaigns in the Third World, sponsored by Population Communications International, emphasizes that by essentializing American values and pushing interventions that embody these values, E–E programs seek to create all forms of support for the American empire. In this instance, once again, a critical modernist standpoint offers an alternative to the otherwise taken-for-granted assumptions about the inherent goodness of population control programs. In his analysis, Dutta-Bergman (2004) suggested that E–E programs manufactured and sent out by USAID push the neo-liberal logic that global health resource problems are a product of individual choices to reproduce, rather than emphasizing problems of resource inequity and redistributive justice that are intertwined with resource inaccess.

In view of the cultural plurality and the complex notion of time and space, theorizing on public relations means thinking relationally and contextually. It means departing from the notions of culture in terms of certain value dimensions and introducing into public relations discourses the tensions and ambiguities of the global cultural economy that are generally suppressed and ignored. It means em-

bracing the vital relationship between culture and identity that exists among human groups today. Globalization scholars underscore the global–local problematic and espouse that individuals today live with the transformations of global modernity and generate new identities informed by localities defined in terms of a complex cultural space (Robertson, 1997; Tomlinson, 1999). Overlooking the cultural implications generally means overlooking the local in the global–local dialectic in public relations research that traditionally follows the Western models. In doing so, public relations becomes a conduit for fostering Western hegemony through the diffusion of Western values and thoughts. Critiquing the E–E programs in India that promote a life of convenience, fast food, and commercialization, Dutta-Bergman (2004) argued that such consumer innovation threatens to displace some of the Indian traditions such as cooking and the idea of family. Here, the criticism of a global phenomenon is articulated through a culturally-situated local lens.

In summary, it is essential to employ critical inquiries in public relations research to problematize the concepts that are taken for granted and allow “ethical ability to promote good or social harmony” (Toth, 2002, p. 248). It is necessary to explore public relations research in the realm of critical theory “in the best interests of democratic society and our desire to respect diversity, cultural influences and difference” (p. 248). Critical inquiry of organizational discourse reveals the forms of “ideology, consent, systematically distorted communication, routines, and normalizations” (Deetz, 2005, p. 94) that are geared toward deterring people from acting in their own interests. The fundamental concern of critical modernism is to understand relations between power, knowledge, social/cultural practices, and language; to deconstruct the master stories of public relations as articulated in the dominant paradigm and to simultaneously find opportunities for interrogating *social realities* of structure and power that are played out through discourse. Hence, the central argument of this article brings to the fore the need for public relations research to embrace critical modernism and address the complex experiences in the globalized world. Addressing the critical issues of cultural identity in understanding how culture influences public relations becomes imperative to open up new vistas of research in the field in an era dominated by multiplicity and difference.

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