

A genealogy of public relations in the context of war

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Abstract

'Truth' has long been a central issue in public relations (PR) discourse. How does PR constitute truth? Governmentality theorists such as Nikolas Rose who adopted Foucault's genealogical method have proposed that 'technologies' of government such as PR can be understood by mapping out historical transformations in liberalism. This paper draws on the work of Rose to discuss prominent historical accounts of the role of PR in war. It suggests that contemporary PR of advanced liberalism constitutes a truth that is shaped by expertise drawing on knowledge of fragmented public opinion markets. This marks a break from the previous truth of social liberal PR which derived more from expertise based on 'objectivity'. No doubt there are other elements in the constitution of this truth but such an insight may provide a satisfying basis for future research on the contemporary role that PR plays in war.

Public relations (PR) plays a key role in modern relations of power especially in times of war. Recent debates (for example see L'Etang 2006) on the ethics of PR have centred on problems of truth especially with regard to the Iraq War (2003–). A genealogical approach suggests that the concept of truth is not stable and absolute but rather is a discursive object that is historically contingent. In this approach, the question becomes: How is truth constituted in contemporary PR? In this paper, I address this question by drawing on Foucault's genealogical method in which PR can be understood as a social practice – a 'goal-directed social regularity' (May 1994, p. 87). Following Cottle (2003) this practice can be defined as the management of public image and communication in the interests of organisational objectives. Rose (1996; 1999) has provided a genealogy of liberalism to identify distinct modes of political reason that have become dominant at various points in the history of liberalism. I use his discussion of the most recently dominant modes – social liberalism and advanced liberalism – to make sense of some histories of public relations in the context of war. This is not to say that local variations do not occur which may not fit with Rose's (1996) schema. However, it is argued here that he provides a useful starting point for understanding truth in contemporary PR from a Foucauldian perspective.

A transformation in the rationality of government began in liberal societies in the 1960s. 'Social government', which had been dominant in the postwar years, envisaged a subject 'as a citizen with rights to social protection and social education in return for duties of social obligation and social responsibility' (Rose 1996, p. 49). Social government brings with it a certain role for expertise which, argued Rose, 'acquires powerful capacities, ... promising to align the self-governing capacities of subjects with the objectives of political authorities by means of persuasion, education and seduction rather than coercion' (1996, p. 50). Objectivity is a key element of 'these new technologies of expert social government' which, as Rose continues, 'appear to depoliticize and technicize a whole swathe of questions by promising that technical calculations will overrule existing logics of contestation between opposing interests' (1996, p. 50).

This role of expertise was to attract powerful critiques from several directions. On the right, as early as the 1940s, Hayek criticised the role of intellectuals in making plans which then had to be 'rendered acceptable to "the people" through all sorts of propagandist means.' He viewed this as 'intellectual hubris' that was 'specious and self-serving' and that subordinated

‘the necessary pluralism of reason to the totalitarian claim to eternal truth’ (Rose 1999, p. 137). Whilst Hayek’s criticisms were unpopular at the time, they were to become salient with the emergence of neo-liberalism in 1960s and 70s (Rose 1999, p. 137). On the left, by the 1960s, as Schudson (1978) observed, the role of expertise came under fire from popular movements. Critics challenged the view that ‘the problems of government were technical, not political’, and that ‘professionals and managers’ in government agencies and corporations ‘were ‘neutral’ or ‘detached’ or ‘objective’ in their decisions (p. 183).

This ‘rhetoric of objectivity’ (Schudson 1978, p. 183) had been adopted by propagandists and psychological warfare researchers in the US by the mid-1950s. As Simpson observed, their ethical assumption that communication was ‘principally ... an instrument of domination’ were cloaked behind ‘new “scientificized” presentations of theory’ (1994, p. 86). For example, an influential annotated series of bibliographies was prepared for the RAND Corporation during 1951–54 entitled *International propaganda and psychological warfare*. By 1956, Simpson (1994, p. 86) noted, this same work was re-published under the new title of *International communication and political opinion*. An example of the power of this objective rhetoric is the media reporting of the Tonkin Gulf incident in 1964 which was used by US officials as a pretext for intervention in Vietnam. Officials had claimed that patrol boats from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam had fired on US vessels. According to Hallin reporting in the US media of the incidents was ‘in virtually every important point ... either misleading or false’ (cited in Herman & Chomsky 1988, p. 208). Despite reporting US government claims uncritically they nevertheless technically reported ‘objectively’, he argued, by correctly conveying the statements of officials. Later, a ‘culture of dissent’, as Schudson (1978) observed, had developed in response to such ‘objectivity’. US defence and security officials were later to refer to the unpopularity of large-scale military intervention as ‘the Vietnam syndrome’ (Chomsky 1992). Public relations (PR) in social liberalism constituted a truth that was closely aligned with expertise based on ‘objectivity’ but one that had also become the subject of serious critique.

With the advent of advanced liberalism comes a new conception of the subject. This brings with it a new conception of the social, a new public and a technology to govern it. Rose (1999, p. 146) observed that ‘society’ of classical and social liberalism has now become fragmented into a multitude of markets. The citizen-subject, he continued, is no longer linked

to the public sphere and the state but rather to a variety of practices from working to shopping. This new public was to be governed by what Rose (1999, p. 189) described as certain ‘technologies of the community’. These technologies, he explained, build upon devices that had been used throughout the second half of the twentieth century – including surveys of attitudes and values, market research, opinion polls and focus groups. As Ewen observed, in the 1960s the opinion-management industry, in response to explosion of grassroots activism, began a ‘parallel effort to render this diversity of voices into a set of manageable categories’ (1996, p. 405). This fragmented public is thought to be amenable to the technique of ‘customized manufacture of public discourse’ – discourse that is made up of ‘serviceable “public opinions” meticulously convened by pollsters, messages or products mindfully calculated to appeal’ to their affections (Ewen 1996, p. 406).

In sum, in contemporary – advanced – liberalism, ‘the truth’ produced by the ‘objective’ expertise of social liberalism becomes overshadowed by the market ‘truth’ of ‘experts of the community’. Whilst these forms of expertise overlap, they are nevertheless distinctive. Furthermore, though ‘the truth’ in PR may well have been re-configured, not all of the problems of governing the advanced liberal subject have been solved. Some US officials believed that the ‘Vietnam syndrome’ was overcome with the invasion of Grenada in 1983 and in a more comprehensive manner with the Gulf War of 1990–91.(Chomsky 1992) Massive military and policing interventions have taken place globally since 9/11, despite substantial popular opposition. But the more expansionist military policies of the neo-conservative Project for a New American Century (PNAC), which informed the plans for Afghanistan and Iraq (Woodward 2004), have stalled. The elections of Obama in the US and Rudd in Australia have brought changes but a new occupation strategy in Iraq, interventions in Afghanistan and forcible deterrence and detention of asylum seekers in Australia continue unabated. By investigating how ‘the truth’ has become re-constituted we may better understand the role PR plays in these issues.

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