From Communitarianism to Dialogue: Building Better Community Relationships

Michael L. Kent, Adam J. Saffer, Erich J. Sommerfeldt

Abstract

Community has long been a central analytic concept in public relations theory and praxis. This article continues the discussion of community building in public relations by arguing that (1) dialogue is an essential component of ethical community building and (2) public relations is uniquely situated within the organizational hierarchy to help build communities through dialogue. Drawing on insights from the communitarian movement, feminism, dialogue, and the social networks concept of *tertius iugens*, this article further develops a dialogic/communitarian model of public relations.

Keyword: community building, communitarian movement, dialogue, social networks, public relations

บทคัดย่อ

เนื่องจากประชาคมเป็นหนึ่งในแนวคิดหลักในการวิเคราะห์การประชาสัมพันธ์ในทั้งภาคทฤษฎีและปฏิบัติ ดังนั้นบทความวิชาการนี้จึงเสนอประเด็นเรื่องการสร้างประชาคม (Community building) ในการ ประชาสัมพันธ์ โดยระบุว่า (1) การสนทนาโต้ตอบ (Dialogue) เป็นองค์ประกอบสำคัญในการสร้างประชาคม ที่ถูกต้องตามหลักจรรยาบรรณ และ (2) การประชาสัมพันธ์ได้ถูกวางตำแหน่งพิเศษภายในโครงสร้างตามช่วง ชั้นขององค์การ (Organizational hierarchy) ที่เอื้อให้เกิดการสร้างชุมชนผ่านการมีปฏิสันฐาน นอกจากนี้ได้มี การนำมุมมองต่างๆ ได้แก่ ความเคลื่อนไหวแบบผลประโยชน์ประชาคมนิยม (Communitarian move ment) สตรีนิยม (Feminism) การสนทนาโต้ตอบ (Dialogue) และเครือข่ายสังคมที่ยอมให้มีบุคคลที่สามเข้า มาเสริมประโยชน์แก่อีกสองฝ่ายได้ (Social networks concept of *tertius iugens*) มาใช้ในการสร้าง แบบจำลองแนวการสนทนาโต้ตอบ/ผลประโยชน์ประชาคมนิยมเพื่อการประชาสัมพันธ์ (Dialogic/communitarian model of public relations)

คำสำคัญ การสร้างประชาคม ความเคลื่อนไหวแบบผลประโยชน์ประชาคมนิยม การสนทนาโต้ตอบ เครือข่ายสังคม การประชาสัมพันธ์

Introduction

"[W]e have some duties that lay moral claim on us for which we derive no immediate benefit or even long-term payoff" (Etzioni, 1993, p. 10).

Most people have never given much thought to how to build a community. We live in communities, just like we live in our houses, but rarely do we consider how our communities are formed. "Genuine community"—as opposed to what might pass for community online—has certain defining characteristics: proximity, longevity, responsibilities, and relationships. More importantly, community relationships are enduring, not ephemeral. An individual is not a member of a community because of where she or he lives. Rather, membership is determined by participation in the common life of the community (Hallahan, 2004). As Etzioni (1993) has suggested,

> When the term community is used, the first notion that typically comes to mind is a place in which people know and care about one another—the kind of place in which people do not merely ask "How are you?" as a formality but care about the answer. This we-ness . . . is indeed part of its essence. (p. 31)

But the question still remains, how is community built? Philosophers and scholars have described the features of communities, but how does one create community?

Our objective with this essay is to take up this notion of community as a "conceptual centerpiece" of public relations theory and praxis (Hallahan, 2004). A small, but vibrant, strain of research has interrogated the role of public relations in community building, advancing more socially harmonious frameworks for public relations theory and practice (e.g., Heath, 2006; Kruckeberg & Stark, 1988; Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor, 2011; Valentini, Kruckeberg, & Starck, 2012). This essay argues that dialogue can be a part of the ethical foundation of community building within the complex networks of relationships that give structure to communities. Dialogue is based on relationships—and like community, dialogue does not just spontaneously occur. Dialogue and community are synergistic, or consubstantial, to use Burkes (1966) term, and can be part of a larger whole.

Drawing on insights from the communitarian movement (e.g., Etzioni, 1993), feminism, and dialogue, we justify the concept of *tertius iugens* (or the third who joins others) in community building, and further develop the dialogic/communitarian model of public relations in an attempt to foster better community and better relationships. The first section of the essay briefly outlines public relations' normative role in community building and in social harmony theories and approaches. The second section takes up a review and critique of communitarian philosophy, including feminist communitarianism. The third section describes the social network concept of *tertius iugens* as a new orientation through which to build community and

relationships in public relations. The final section develops a dialogic model of public relations as a tool to enact *tertius iugens* in community building and advance social harmony.

Public Relations and Community Relationships

Scholars have taken great interest in community building as a normative framework for the ethical and socially responsible practice of public relations (e.g., Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor, 2011; Valentini, Kruckeberg, & Starck, 2012). Originally, community building emerged as a topical focus in public relations scholarship as a response to positivistic managerial research that defined public relations as an organizational tool used to influence publics and individuals to the benefit of organizations (Culbertson & Chen, 1997). Kruckeberg and Starck (1988), influenced by the Chicago School and Dewey's (1927) conception of publics, took issue with the disciplines' dominant—and arguably narrow-minded—focus on organizational effectiveness and responded by exploring ways public relations could build communities. Starck and Kruckeberg (2001) argued:

> [P]ublic relations is best defined and practiced as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community . . . lost because of the development of modern means of communication/transportation . . . Community building can be proactively encouraged and nurtured by corporations with the guidance and primary leadership of these organizations' public relations practitioners. (pp. 58–59)

Stark and Kruckeberg (2001), among others, argued that public relations practitioners can nudge organizations toward engaging in activities that foster a sense of community. Indeed, Sommerfeldt (2013) argued that public relations scholars and practitioners should rethink public relations as a community building function that enables a more participative democracy.

However, some have questioned whether public relations, as a function considerably influenced by Western, neo-liberal value systems, can actually contribute to the advancement of social harmony. Postmodernists have accused applied communication fields like public relations of helping maintain social systems of domination and competition (Holtzhausen, 2012). Moloney (2006) similarly asserted that public relations "reflects and generates social competition, not harmony" (p. 14). Moloney characterizes public relations as an organizational function that fosters arguments among competing ideas and interests in the marketplace—a notion echoed by many, including Heath (2000) who described public relations as part of the ongoing "wrangle in the marketplace" (p. 75).

A competitive metaphor for public relations' existence is also prevalent throughout the public relations literature. Take the organization–public relationship literature, wherein relationships are described as providing organizations with a "competitive advantage" over others (Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006, p. 38; also, Ni, 2006, p. 276). Or, in the corporate social responsibility literature, for instance, in which organizations are obliged to comply with the demands of a competitive environment to achieve "organizational survival" (Atakan-Duman & Ozdora-Aksak, 2014, p. 862).

For Marsh (2012, 2013), the subtle (sometimes explicit) references, assumptions, and metaphors of competition found throughout the public relations scholarship run parallel to claims in Darwin's (1998/1871) evolutionary theory, which, of course, argued that organisms must compete for survival in a crowded and dangerous ecosystem. Marsh's inquiries into the parallels between Darwin's evolutionary theory and existing public relations theories introduces the writings of Peter Kropotkin (1989/1902), who provided a stark contrast to Darwin's popular evolutionary theory by arguing that humans are more likely to survive through cooperation, not competition. As Marsh (2012) noted:

> Within public relations scholarship, challenges to social harmony frameworks often, consciously or otherwise, evoke natural selection to describe the inevitability of competitive, inharmonious views of relationships . . . If we are to pursue such important injections of evolutionary biology into public relations, we should pursue it fully, casting wide the net to include the belief of Charles Darwin and Peter Kropotkin that, in terms of sustainable human cultures, natural selection favors harmonious, not competitive, instincts and relationships. Indeed, a broader application of evolutionary biology within public relations research would seem to offer a scientific foundation for a goal of social harmony within public relations frameworks. (p. 330)

Marsh eloquently argues that metaphors of mutual aid and social harmony, rather than those of competition must be employed to advance public relations research and praxis. From this perspective, if organizations are to survive and thrive, public relations—as a "boundary spanning" function and organizational representative to stakeholders and publics—must adopt more collaborative and symbiotic approaches to interacting with their environments. Thus, in the pursuit of constructing more socially harmonious frameworks for public relations, we review the philosophy of communitarianism.

A Communitarianism Approach to Community Building

The community building literature in public relations has often drawn on communitarianism philosophy and communitarianism has long had implications in "publics, corporate social responsibility and ethics" (Hallahan, 2004, p. 238; see also Leeper, 1996). Communitarianism took root in public relations scholarship in the 1990s following the compelling articulation of communitarian principles by Amati Etzioni (1988, 1993), one of the founders of the modern "Communitarian Movement." In his 1993 book, *The Spirit of Community: The Reinvention of American Society*, Etzioni outlines the dominant features of communitarianism. According to Etzioni, the communitarian movement:

> . . . is an environmental movement dedicated to the betterment of our moral, social, and political environment . . . And communitarians are dedicated to working with their fellow citizens to bring about the changes in values, habits, and public policies that will allow us to do for society what the environmental movement seeks to do for nature: to safeguard and enhance our lives. (1993, pp. 2–3)

The communitarian emphasis on community arose in direct response to liberalism and libertarianism—rival philosophical traditions that both emphasize the rights and autonomy of the individual, rather than the common good. As Weiss (1993) explains, communitarianism refers to the "rejection of the liberal notion of an isolated self with rights, interests, values, and ends independent of social context" (p. 125). Communitarians thus argue for increased focus on communal responsibilities.

The notion of communities of responsibility—as presented by Etzioni (1993) and other advocates of communitarianism—is appealing and seductive. Critics of communitarianism, however, have accused the philosophy of being "utopian" and unrealistic (Marsh, 2012, 2013). One problem with Etzioni's construction of community, along with many public relations conceptualizations of community (cf. Hallahan, 2004), is that his construction is still a liberal democratic one in that "rational citizens" have the ability to make choices for the good of their communities. In liberal democratic theory, the good of the individual must sometimes take a backseat for the good of the collective—but the willingness to give up individual rights or positions for communal goals is done only when people feel safe in the knowledge that they will not lose their rights, safety, or security, and will continue to participate in public life regardless of losing a particular argument.

But who knows any "rational citizens" anymore? Moreover, as Held (1987) pointed out in her critique of Western, liberal-democratic thought, the notion of the individual who can assert rights, enter into contracts with other entities, and vote, is not consistent with the experience of most women and many minorities (1987, p. 124; cf. also, Weiss, 1993, p. 132).

Regardless of such criticisms, we believe that public relations scholarship should not dismiss the social harmony goals advanced by communitarian philosophy simply because there are critiques. Indeed, every theory privileges one position over another. Social harmony is a worthy goal for public relations and can better inform practitioner's roles in building relationships within communities. In the next section, we briefly outline a feminist-communitarianism approach—a perspective that helps to address some of the criticisms of mainstream communitarian philosophy.

A Feminist-Communitarianism Approach to Community Building

Another more liberal form of communitarianism is the feminist branch of the philosophy. As Weiss (1993) explains it: ". . . [non-feminist] communitarians are concerned with the *loss* of 'traditional boundaries,' while feminists are concerned with the *cost* of these boundaries, especially for women" (p. 129, author's emphasis). Although the feminist communitarian recognizes that public space, communal interaction, and social responsibility are important concepts, s/he is not willing to sacrifice individual rights in the process.

A good example might be the way that bribery is accepted in some countries as a necessary part of doing business (e.g., Tsetsura, 2015). Bribery is often called "institutionalized corruption" (14iacc.org/social/tag/bribe), giving it an innocuous slant. The non-feminist communitarian might accept bribery as a necessary part of doing business, as long as no one is harmed and the larger community is served in the process. While the feminist communitarian might ask "who benefits from such practices and what happens to the poor or disadvantaged who cannot afford to pay extra for government services or to avoid police harassment?" We, of course, know the answer to this question. Feminist communitarianism clearly seems to be a step beyond the "good of the *many*" outweighing "the good of the *few*" approach seen in mainstream communitarianism—especially when the few are often minorities, women and others in society without power or resources, and the "few" are often "quite a few" who go unseen by the privileged and elites.

Communitarian Obstacles to Overcome

We believe that communitarianism holds significant promise to position dialogue as an ethical communication model within a more socially harmonious framework of public relations. That said, the community building literature in public relations, as well as communitarianism philosophy itself, has significant weaknesses that we believe can be corrected by adding the notion of *tertius iungens* to the public relations scholarship.

First, we are faced with the problem that the "community"—arguably once a fairly identifiable and concrete construct— no longer exists in its previous form

(Hallahan, 2004). We now live in a time where communities can transcend geographic spaces and time. Individuals can now "belong" to communities online or enact relationships with their immediate or extended communities through mediated, rather than interpersonal, forms. Citizens, and the communities to which they belong, are now extremely mobile. Moreover, when we take a feminist approach to the definition of community, we are faced with the question of who gets to decide which people belong in the community? Who gets to be in the community and who is excluded? We believe that a network metaphor can work to address some of the deficiencies in the prior definitions of community.

A second flaw we see in existing communitarian models is the assumption that individual(s) make rational choices for the good of the collective. Communitarianism disregards the liberal belief of individual rights, values, and self-determination. Although the feminist communitarian model is more compelling and perhaps more "humane" than liberal communitarianism, it ultimately rests on choices being made on behalf of others and individuals sacrificing their autonomy and personal gain. The question then becomes: how do we account for individual autonomy while also considering the collective's interests?

Social capital theorists suggest that, in certain conditions, individuals' autonomy and the collective good can coincide. As Coleman (1988) explained, in well-connected, dense networks (or communities), members can impose sanctions on members for not behaving in a manner that advances the collective good. For example, when an individual belongs to a dense network, other members know the individual and can monitor his/her behavior. Should the person behave negatively, members can collectively impose sanctions to correct the individual's behaviors or set a social norm within the network (or community).

Third, the issue of building community relationships is complex, yet public relations scholarship is primarily organization-centric and often focuses on the characteristics of an organization's dyadic relationship (cf. Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015). While organizations are mentioned in the literature as members of communities, researchers have focused their attention on organizations, rather than the community and relationships (cf., Kent, 2010). Such a narrow focus does not adequately account for the complexity of relationships that exist within a community (Heath, 2013; Kent, Sommerfeldt, & Saffer, 2015). Community members have relationships with many other community members that may include other organizations, activist groups, and individuals. To account for the complexities of community building and turn the focus toward the multitude of community *relationships*, we introduce the social network perspective in the next section.

A Social Network Perspective on Community Relationships

Social network theories, and the associated network methods, have recently been introduced to the public relations literature as an approach that has the ability to holistically examine relationships (Yang & Taylor, 2015). Social network perspectives assume that social relations are the building blocks of society (van Dijk, 2012). A network is formed by relationships among network members, which may include individuals, groups, or organizations (Marin & Wellman, 2011). Generally speaking, network theories and methods study three general elements: (1) identifying the relationships among individuals, groups, organizations and communities; (2) explaining how relationships influence individuals, groups, organizations and communities; (3) describing how individuals, groups, organizations and communities construct, sustain and alter their networks (Knoke & Yang, 2008).

There are three primary insights from social network theory that may assist in expanding a dialogic, communitarian framework for community building in public relations. First, network perspectives take a contrary position to the organization-centric and dyadic focus of the organization–public research. Network theories recognize that all actors are interconnected and influenced those connections. By focusing on the multitude of relationships in community networks, we can see the opportunities and tensions that exist among networks of relationships. Individuals and organizations do not have one relationship with one individual or public at a time (Heath, 2013). For our purposes here, network perspectives can help to answer the question of what is a community and who can be in a community through the concepts of structural holes and *tertius iungens*.

Structural holes exist in networks when there are gaps or a lack of relationships among network members. The network members who connect the otherwise unconnected members in a network are called brokers (Burt, 1992). Burt (1992, 2001) characterized brokers as powerful actors within a network who have relationships and access to non-redundant information and resources. According to Burt (1992), brokers are powerful because of their ability to filter and color the flow of information and resources among unconnected groups. The concept of brokerage in structural holes theory comes from *tertius gauden*—the Latin term for the "third who benefits." Burt (1992) explained that a network broker is the *tertius* who benefits by brokering the information and resources between two unconnected groups. The theory assumes a competitive environment with limited resources and information, much like has been described of Darwinian organizational thinking.

Organizations can be a *tertius* when engaging in community relations by brokering relationships between groups within the community. In theory, an organization can "benefit" (i.e. be the *tertius gauden*) when it is able to broker the information or communication among other network members. Some public relations researchers have recommended that organizations strategically position themselves as brokers within networks to better meet their goals (Sommerfeldt, 2013b; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005).

Yet, structural holes theory and the notion of *tertius gaudens* run counter to social harmony frameworks and implicitly adopt a competitive metaphor for public relations. Recently, Kent et al. (2015) illustrated how the assumptions within structural holes theory are antithetical to contemporary public relations values. The scholars' critique also introduced the network term *tertius iugens* as an orientation that aligns with public relations values.

Tertius Iugens and Community Building

Tertius iungens, like *tertius gauden,* recognizes that structural holes occur in networks and that influence arises when a member is able to connect otherwise unconnected members of a network. However, *tertius iugens* challenges the assumptions and orientations embedded in structural holes theory. First, *tertius iungens* approaches networks with a cooperative and collaborative orientation instead of a competitive orientation (Obstfeld, 2005). This aligns with other social harmony frameworks as well with a community model of public relations. Second, *tertius iungens* recasts the broker role as an arbiter. Instead of being the third who benefits by separating others—*tertius iungens* is a third who benefits the network by joining others and acting as an arbiter. As Garriga (2009) explained, "'iungo' implies join, unite or connect. The *tertius iungens* strategy implies the uniting of disconnected parties" (p. 633). We believe that *tertius iungens,* through its orientation toward cooperation, provides an ethical framework for discussing public relations roles in community building.

A Dialogic Approach to Community Relationship Building

In the previous sections we outlined communitarian philosophy, its potential benefits for a community-oriented framework of public relations, weaknesses of a communitarian orientation for public relations, and how network perspectives help to address those shortcomings. However, missing from this discussion is a communication framework for enacting community building, communitarianism and *tertius iungens*. Like others, we believe dialogue can serve a key role in community building (cf. Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994; Buber, 1970; Freire, 1970; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Through dialogue, organizations, activist groups, and individuals can engage in ethical communication that builds mutually beneficial relationships across communities and networks.

First and foremost, dialogue is concerned with the confirmation and acknowledgement of others, and the attempt to treat others with "unconditional positive regard" (Rogers, 1994). As Kent and Taylor (2002) explained:

> Dialogue as an orientation includes five features: *mutuality*, or the recognition of . . . relationships; *propinquity*, or the temporality and spontaneity of

interactions . . . ; *empathy*, or the supportiveness and confirmation of . . . goals and interests; *risk*, or the willingness to interact with individuals . . . on their own terms; and finally, *commitment*, or the extent to which an [individual] . . . gives [him/herself] . . . over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding. (pp. 24–25)

Because genuine dialogue is comprised by the above principles, dialogue is not akin to mere conversation or debate. Dialogue is a communicative orientation that requires participants to relinquish control over the outcomes of communication, and create structures and rules to facilitate open and supportive interactions.

The dialogic approach is considered by many scholars and professionals to be an especially ethical approach to interactions with others and for creating mutually beneficial and rewarding solutions to problems. However, dialogue has some drawbacks and limitations. First, engaging in dialogue is time consuming for members and requires a commitment to "continue the conversation." Second, dialogue requires the training of participants in the rules of the conversational exchange, what counts as a turn, and when the rules themselves can be questioned. Third, dialogue must *not* be used to manipulate others or to create individual gains rather than collective benefits.

If we envision public relations as an organizational function that enacts *tertius iungens* (the third who joins) it becomes apparent that dialogue can be the communicative means through which public relations can fulfill the promise of the "iungo." Dialogue is an orientation to others. Dialogue privileges mutual understanding, engagement, and respect. We believe these elements to be the communicative building blocks of efficacious communities. Recognizing that many people in a network may not know one another, public relations practitioners can use their positions in resource-rich and well-connected organizations to bring together disparate parts of a network and facilitate a dialogue among them. Indeed, organizations can serve as arbiters of such dialogues, bringing together dissimilar parts of a network, thereby facilitating the creation of the "cross-cutting ties" that are necessary for social capital to form and societies to thrive (Sommerfeldt, 2013a).

There is *potential* to create community through dialogic communication; it is not a given. Engaging in genuine dialogue that works to build genuine, long-lasting communities requires constant vigilance. As Anderson, Cissna, and Arnett (1994) explain:

Human dialogue does not just happen, as if sunshine suddenly replaces a thunderstorm. But neither can dialogue be planned, pronounced, or willed. Where we find dialogue, we find people who are open to it . . . . Dialogue is a dimension of communication quality that keeps communicators more focused on mutuality and relationship than on self-interest, more concerned with discovering than disclosing, more interested in access than in domination. (p. 2)

Dialogue can work to facilitate the communitarian goals of community building and privileging the "greater good" while still respecting the rights and interest of individuals. But only when public relations practitioners discard competitive metaphors and instead adopt collaboration and mutual aid as their goal can genuine dialogue between organizations and their publics become possible.

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