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The object of Public Relations and its ethical implications for late modern society – a Foucauldian analysis

This paper draws on a Foucauldian framework to show two distinct ways in which forms of public relations work in the public sphere to suppress the emergence of other coherences and discursive formations, particularly in relation to social movements. It argues that, not only are these practices socially divisive, antagonistic and politically offensive, but they are counter-productive within the conditions of late modernity and must change. Identifying and understanding the causes and effects of unethical public relations will open up new research agendas that help to explore alternative approaches to communication in the public sphere which avoid these consequences.

Introduction

For citizens going about daily life – working, shopping, playing sport – the apparatus of unethical public relations and its effects are often hidden and unseen. This is not surprising because public relations’ core characteristics of invisibility and persuasion are considered the means to its effectiveness. However, over the last three decades critics of public relations have been vocal about the social effects. A concern is the concealed presence of self-interested ‘PR’ and its influence in areas such as news media where citizens are likely to engage in interpretative discussion around contested public issues. Another is that some public relations practitioners act in highly unethical ways in relation to activist groups that challenge their activities (Nelson 1989: 131). Critics argue that this is because practitioners bow routinely to the self-interest of their employers, leading to unscrupulous behaviour and deliberate harm to the reputation of the opposition. These factors have highlighted the need to examine the profession’s ethical foundations and to acknowledge that public relations as a communicative activity has a fragile relationship to economy, civil and state sectors and democracy that needs to be monitored (Nelson 1989; Stauber and Rampton 1995; Beder 1997; Hager and Burton 1999).

According to media ethicist Breit (2007: xvii), the contemporary public relations industry is a powerful element in a rapidly transforming media environment where technological, social economic and cultural change is ‘valorising information’ and turning media and communication into ‘international commodities’. However, she argues that it is also a problematic profession from a social point of view. This is because it is highly influential and has the potential to exploit news and media outlets ‘to the point of setting agendas and becoming primary definers themselves’ (ibid: 10). She argues that public relations – which in Australia is largely self-regulatory – must therefore be practised in a reflective way. But this paper asks how do public relations practitioners ‘reflect’ when often they do not understand what it is precisely that they ‘do’? New technologies, such as the Internet and ‘social media’ developments such as Second Life have increased the realm of activity for ‘PR’ but in tandem with these techno-economic-communicative developments, new critical tools are needed to explicate these social-linguistic processes in order to analyse their broader sometimes negative effects. Knowledge in this area will help to inform decision making in public relations and conduct of individual practitioners by defining stronger and clearer ethical positions, responsibilities and accountabilities (ibid: 308-9).

In tackling these questions, this paper seeks to address a gap in the current discussions and to investigate how public relations practitioners act especially in relation to social groups such as activists and what it is they produce. It will firstly canvass a range of differing professional and academic worldviews within public relations that are relevant to the discussion of activism and communication; secondly it will overview two important communicative theories (Habermas 1995; Foucault 1972) that can be applied to explain some of the unethical activities associated with public relations. Next the paper will detail a case study of unethical

Kristin Demetrious
public relations in New Zealand and then apply the Foucauldian and Habermasian theories to several of the campaign texts – discussing the different ways these theories help to understand them. Lastly, the paper will discuss new strategies in teaching and practice of media and communication that point to fairer and more collaborative forms of social and professional relations taking into account the multi-dimensional concepts of ethics, responsibility and accountability in decision making.

The object of ‘PR’

An important question in unpacking ethical issues around the practice of public relations is to establish how, as a profession, it relates to others in society and treats its stakeholders. According to Nelson (op cit), Stauber and Rampton (op cit) and Beder (op cit) public relations has a deep and historic animosity to activism. Indeed, much mainstream USA public relations literature lacks reference to and/or frames activists adversely as undermining their legitimate activities. For example, the work of public relations analyst Larissa Grunig (1992) contains a specific reference to activism but only as something to be ‘managed’. She says studying activism helps ‘practitioners deal in more than an ad hoc way with the opposition their organizations face from activist groups’ (ibid: 503). Deegan reflects a similar defensive view in Managing Activism (2001), a book endorsed by the Institute of Public Relations, when he discusses that few business organizations are prepared for ‘the growing threat’ of an ‘activist attack’, and advises a proactive, rather than reactive, approach in learning how to ‘manage’ them. In particular, he argues that ‘risk communications’ (ibid: 94) is a specialist area in the management of public backlash or outrage, if for example ‘there is a temptation to gloss over’ an ‘accidental toxic spillage’ …‘when communicating with key audiences’ (ibid: 93).

This explanation of ‘risk’ is quite unlike sociologist Ulrich Beck’s holistic definition of ‘risk’ as ‘hazardous side effects’ of the modernization process. Beck (1992) says that risk in this sense presents global dangers for humanity but importantly signals a break in the logic driving political, social and economic development. As a result of this sub-political movements or activists will occupy a more central social space as the locus of politics (ibid: 20-1). Deegan’s ideas about risk are localized and concerned with the micro-management of organizations in trouble with communities over some breach. He argues, in this case, that ‘risk communications’ is largely a matter of managing perceptions, because, ‘activists often exaggerate the risks associated with an organization’ (op cit: 94). Echoing this theme, in 2005, the Victorian branch of the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA Victoria) advertised a workshop conducted by public relations consultant Ross Irvine designed for practitioners to ‘beat’ activists ‘at their own game’. It defined activists as ‘special interest groups, lobby groups or NGOs (non-government organizations)’ and argued that activists ‘believe they know what is best for us – they have assumed moral leadership on many issues globally and they pressure businesses, governments and society to embrace their ideology’ (PRIA Victoria 2005). Overall these sentiments demonstrate that some views about legitimate forms of public relations include a complex and continuing antagonism with civil sector groups such as activists.

However, Larissa Grunig (op cit), Deegan (op cit) and the PRIA Victoria (op cit) are not representative of all the voices within the field of public relations. There are a range of other critical, differing and reflective views about activists. Smith and Ferguson, for example, approach the subject of activism from a more theoretically diverse and socially unifying perspective arguing: ‘[W]e treat activists, not only as challenges for public relations practitioners but also as practitioners themselves. In developing our views, we draw from political science, sociology, communication and public relations’ (Smith and Ferguson 2001: 291). Cheney and Christensen accept criticisms of the professional area by acknowledging that ‘public relations can perhaps be accused of trying to maintain discussions within relatively limited Western corporate arenas’ (2001: 182). This marked divergence in views about the treatment of activist stakeholders within the field of public relations reflects a level of unresolved tension which this paper argues has significant implications for the future practice and theory of public relations.

Theorising media, society and meaning making

One of the principal theories used by academics and ethicists to understand what it is that public relations practitioners ‘do’ and the relationship of this to modern society is the work of Habermas (1995). First published in 1962, Jurgen Habermas’ The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society is a socio-historic discussion of
the public sphere; which can be defined as a conceptual space, separate from the state, where citizens, in a free and open way, engage in dialogue and debate focused around issues for the common good. Habermas examines its evolution, the transformation of its functions and, last, its possible reorganization and renewal. In theorising media relationships through his communicative concept, Habermas brings into relief a grey, shifting and indistinct area of commercial, state and civic activity focused on the development of representation, authority and legitimacy. In particular, his analysis of public relations is useful to understand the media apparatus that maintains and reproduces power structures in activist debates. It is through this analysis that Habermas sheds light on ideals and the role of public opinion and rationality in shaping the social directions taken by society, government and business in late modern society.

According to Habermas, the genesis of the public sphere can be traced to early Greek and Roman democracies within the social patterns of the polis or city and the idea of lexis or discussion. He explains how the process of citizen discussion clarified issues of social importance: ‘only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed become revealed, did everything become visible to all. In the discussion among citizens, issues were made topical and took on shape’ (ibid: 4). For Habermas (ibid: 3-5), the idea of the public sphere, as a centre of self-interpretation that promotes the good of its members, gained acceptance in succeeding societies and periods, including modernity. Habermas argues that the changed social and economic conditions associated with the rise of European trade and capitalism created a new middle class with substantial power. These conditions empowered citizens who developed a distinct communicative activity that compelled authorities to justify themselves and their activities to the collective opinion of the people. The public sphere was the realm of communicative activity ‘now casting itself loose as a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion’ (ibid: 25). By the eighteenth century, Habermas claims, people were using communication ‘without historical precedent’ as the organizing point and the process by which to critique their lives using reason (ibid: 27).

For Habermas, the practices of public relations – unlike advertising which is overt and recognizable as such – are deeply embroiled in the political realm of the public sphere. He claims that the addressee of public relations is the private citizen, not the consumer as such (ibid: 193). For Habermas, this is because public relations is the instrument of specialized commercial interests and its goal is the creation of self-serving public consent in which acceptance takes place. Therefore, for public relations to be successful consumers must be given a false consciousness and believe that they are actually making a decision based on their own judgment about what is good for society. As a result of the proliferation of this activity, Habermas concludes that rational agreement arising from exchanges of different opinion has disappeared from the public sphere because it is ousted by public relations (ibid: 195).

Indeed he argues (ibid: 193) that invisible public relations which conceals commercial interests and masquerades as discussion for the common good exploits the ‘classic idea’ of a group of private people using reason to come together as a public for its own self-interested ends. For Habermas, moreover, this form of publicity in modernity is dangerous for democracy because it strengthens prestige and position, without drawing attention to unwanted discussion. Organizations and functionaries become interested in representation, not just from the outside, but through the public sphere as a form of legitimization (ibid: 201). Public relations is, therefore, more subversive, politically oriented and powerful than advertising because it exploits and invades the process of the formation of public opinion. Hence the work of Habermas provides a useful theoretical framework in which the ‘invisible’ relationship between public relations and society can be explained and understood.

However, the theories of Habermas have limitations and can be described as approaching analysis from the discipline of the ‘history of ideas’. According to Foucault, the history of ideas is a conventional research analysis style that ‘sets out to cross the boundaries of existing disciplines, to deal with them from the outside, and to re-interpret them’ (1972: 137). He says it takes account of the history of the literature, of science and of philosophy in trying to make connections and sense of themes and relationships, in hoping to ‘rediscover the immediate experience that the discourse transcribes’ (ibid: 137). As a result the approach preoccupies itself with its own theme, with establishing continuities ‘beginnings and ends’ – and hence overlooks knowledge (ibid). In applying this, Habermas can be
interpreted as concentrating on understanding effects of power within the particular conditions of modernity. Indeed, his (1995: 162) primary concern is the effects of a culture of consumption on the development and maintenance of rational critical debate, particularly in relation to the public sphere.

McHoul and Grace (1993) argue that Foucault approaches analysis from a different point of view. He ontologically detaches himself from the present and seeks to look at the rules that run through discourses but not ‘in terms of the defining characteristics of modernity’ (McHoul and Grace 1993: 60-1). However, according to Foucault, analysis from the history of ideas should not be abandoned altogether; rather an archaeological approach will yield deeper and more rigorous knowledge. For example, an archaeological approach to the study of communication identifies discourses and the rules by which their practices operate, not the ‘thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed in discourses’ (Foucault 1972: 138-9). It is also interested more in the object at the core rather than the things that the discourse is saying: ‘it is not a return to the innermost secret of the origin; it is the systematic description of a discourse-object’ (ibid: 139-140).

Considering procedural questions, however, Foucault (ibid: 199) anticipates his work’s methodological weaknesses. For example he concedes that by looking for general rules of discourse he could overlook the significance of temporal phenomena or specific conditions and that he also fails to investigate the role of the speaking subject.

To investigate unethical public relations and its effects, this paper will draw on these two different analyses of power, that is, as a structural discursive investigation (Foucault 1972) and in terms of the significance of temporal phenomena and specific conditions of modernity (Habermas 1995). Therefore, this two-fold analysis provides a rich, complex understanding of power in late modern risk society and addresses the limitations Foucault identified firstly, with an archaeological approach (op cit: 135-140) and secondly with an approach which investigates solely modern society (McHoul and Grace op cit: 60-1). This conceptualization positions the research not just as an examination of a particular case study of unethical public relations and activism, but more broadly as a study of communicative change and transformation of social structures.

Foucault’s notion of discursive formation is a foundation concept of discourse. ‘Discursive formation’ refers to the creation of the discourse and the method by which statements disperse and appear through regularity, order and strategic choices (ibid: 38). Discourses are languages with history belonging to a particular formation. Foucault argues that unities or groupings and their discourses, such as medicine or political economy, should only be accepted if they are subject to ‘interrogation; to break them up and then to see whether they can be legitimately reformed; or whether other groupings should be made’ (ibid: 26). Once ideas about unities are questioned, ‘an entire field is set free’ (ibid: 26). Therefore, discourses do not remain static, they move, bend and eventually transform – but how does this take place? Foucault argues that ‘contradictions’ have an important role in understanding how the process of change occurs and how new strategies and concepts come about. He argues that there are two distinct forms of contradiction. On the one hand, some contradictions operate at an intrinsic and surface level from the same discursive formation, under the same conditions of operation of the enunciative function ‘without in any way affecting the body of enunciative rules that makes them possible’ (ibid: 153). On the other hand some ‘are extrinsic contradictions that reflect the opposition between distinct formations’ (ibid: 153; italics in original).

Foucault’s notion of objects in discursive formations is also one of the central research concepts that I use in understanding unethical public relations. He argues that objects do not exist somewhere waiting to be found. Instead, they have a ‘normative’ relationship with a society or one which can be defined as conforming to social expectations that ‘imply legitimacy,
consent and prescription’ (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1994: 288). Foucault cites the normative example of ‘motor disturbances, hallucinations and speech disorders’ that were once understood to be manifestations of madness, but were subsequently redefined through psychopathology (op cit: 40). Foucault’s analysis of these socially constructed ‘objects’ is to find out ‘the first surfaces of their emergence’ (italics in original) in order to understand what they do (ibid: 41). He argues that to understand the object and its definition other social phenomena of the day, such as the authority that limits their use, must be investigated. In the case of madness, Foucault names medicine as the authority that established, named and set limits around the object (ibid: 42). Foucault says that a particular mix of social conditions is necessary for the appearance of an object, and that an underlying system of rules enables its transformation. He argues: ‘[T]hese rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects’ (ibid: 49).

In summary, Foucault’s ideas about objects and contradictions in transformation and change underpin my questions about public relations as a legitimate ‘unity’ and my search for a stronger and more inclusive one that includes stronger ethical foundations and tolerance for civil as well as state and business sectors. Drawing on the ideas of Foucault it also questions the fundamental basis of public relations as a unity and explores its potential for reformation and regrouping.

Putting a name to it – the object of unethical PR
The next section sets out an interesting case study of unethical public relations which occurred in New Zealand and includes forms such as ‘astroturfing’ and ‘greenwashing’ amongst others (Nelson 1989; Stauber and Rampton 1995; Beder 1997). Astroturfing refers to a ‘fee for service’ artificial grass roots public support offered by public relations companies. For example, a talkback radio segment might be bombarded with calls from ‘genuine’ concerned citizens claiming to support a contested fast food development; in reality, these people are ‘stooges’ working for the organization. Greenwashing is the use of public relations to manipulate public views that corporations are acting in environmentally responsible ways. According to Australian consumer watch dog organization Choice, at the moment ‘consumers are getting bombarded by greenwash’ and that ‘sorting the dodgy green claims from the genuine ones can be a minefield’ (Choice 2008). The case study was chosen because it provides a comprehensive description of a campaign and textual evidence, and also because of the ensuing bitterness between members of the public relations profession in the wake of an investigation.

Case study: Timberlands
In late 1999 New Zealander Nicky Hager and Australian Bob Burton made a formal complaint about unethical public relations to the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ), concerning the conduct of two of its members. They claimed that elaborate and highly unethical forms of public relations had occurred designed to undermine public debate about the future of West Coast New Zealand’s temperate rainforest. Following this PRINZ instigated an internal investigation to establish the validity of the claims, but this was abandoned after a dispute between the institute and the members under investigation (Harrison 2004). Instead, PRINZ asked independent lawyer, Hugh Rennie, QC, to report back to the national executive with findings and a recommendation on the allegations of breach of ethics. The key players in this case-study are: the state-owned enterprise Timberlands West Coast Ltd, a logging company owned by the New Zealand government; PR company Shandwick New Zealand employed by Timberlands to ‘neutralize’ disagreement about its activities; community action groups: the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society, ECO, Greenpeace, Buller Conservation Group, Native Forest Action (NFA) and Victoria University Environment Group (VEG); and lastly, the New Zealand public relations professional association, PRINZ (Harrison 2004, Hager and Burton 1999, PRINZ 2001).

Hager and Burton’s subsequent book Secrets and Lies: The anatomy of an anti-environmental PR campaign claims Timberlands hired Shandwick New Zealand to mount a $1 million PR campaign to win government support for continued rainforest logging and to discourage their opponents. They claim the PR campaign began with activists receiving aggressive counter tactics for their involvement. Other claims include: buying local support through sponsorship; cultivating political allies to act as spokespeople and lobbyists; persuading newspapers to run favourable stories; infiltrating environmental group NFA to access information, monitor communication, tape-record their activities and then approach newspapers accusing them of being a front group for the Labour and Green parties; paying a bogus member $50 per hour to report back on VEG activities;
photographing or videotaping protestors and noting their clothing and brand names on file; using extremist discourse to describe and attack the activists and ‘create the impression that they were insignificant, irrational outsiders’ (Hager and Burton 1999: 38); creating front group Coast Action Network which claimed to represent the ‘majority of West Coaster[s] who have had a gutful of propaganda aired by extreme conservation groups’ (ibid: 39); and using scare tactics, for example legal letters to protestors threatening to sue for up to $100,000 (known as ‘strategic lawsuits against public participation’ or SLAPPs) (ibid: 41).

The evidence for the claims made in Secrets and lies was provided when one of the authors sought to confirm his growing suspicion that the Timberlands activists were the subject of an unjust but carefully planned and sustained communication campaign. Drawing on New Zealand’s small group networks he looked for PR practitioners or insiders who were willing to divulge information about the covert campaign. In 1999 evidence of the campaign, which became known as the ‘Timberland Papers’, was passed over, with hundreds of pages of photocopies that included PR strategies, minutes, legal advice, correspondence etc.

The papers showed that the environmentalists’ suspicions, far from being unfounded, underestimated the scale of the PR campaign against them. Here was detailed planning of how to cause trouble for the environmental groups and anyone who helped them: researching their vulnerabilities and deciding on the best tactics for countering them. Here were matter-of-fact discussions about infiltrating environmental groups to acquire information that could assist the campaign (ibid: 14).

In PRINZ allegations of breach of ethics final report (the Rennie Report), QC Rennie investigated five of Hager and Burton’s 18 claims. Two of the five claims investigated were upheld: first that Shandwick New Zealand paid a student to spy on the activists and second that Shandwick New Zealand had a responsibility to caution clients in the adoption of the ‘mindset of conflict’, which in this case resulted in the promotion of terms like ‘extremists’ to describe Timberlands’ opponents. Indeed Rennie said: ‘Such denigration of citizens with strongly held opinions about the use of a public asset is in danger of Goebbels-type misuse’ (Rennie in PRINZ 2001: 32).

However, three of the five claims investigated were dismissed. They were: Shandwick’s media campaign was judged to be comprehensive and extensive but not unethical; the tactic of drafting letters for use by Timberlands community supporters was dismissed because it was deemed that individuals had free choice to sign and; the creation of front groups like Coast Action Network could not be proved in this case, but if true this was deemed to be unethical.

**The aftermath**

Following this PRINZ undertook a review of its Constitution and its Code of Professional Practice to address the inadequacies Rennie identified. However, the two Shandwick New Zealand executives, Sorensen and McGregor, publicly resigned from PRINZ, furious about the scrutiny of their activities, saying:

For the Institute to treat two individuals with a total of 32 years public relations experience in this way is appalling. They bent over backwards to entertain complaints from those who simply sought to promote themselves and in the process ignored the rights of their members and the Institute’s obligations to them (cited in Harrison 2004: 6).

While Secrets and Lies co-author Hager issued the following statement:

I think that the case shows that some people in the PRINZ national executive were keen to take a stand on unethical behaviour. The Institute’s declaration that it is unethical to attack citizens who are exercising their democratic rights is a very important decision … Since public relations campaigns have a strong potential to undermine democratic processes, there is an urgent need to find a more effective way of ensuring ethical PR behaviour (Hager, 11 May 2001).

**Analysis**

This paper seeks to understand the different ways in which public relations practice demonstrated in the Timberlands case study is unethical in relation to activist groups and how this affects the public sphere and the profession as a whole. This section investigates in detail two examples of the public relations used by Shandwick. The ideas of Habermas (1995) will be used to analyse public relations is a particular form of social relations within the period of modernity, a Foucauldian analysis (1972) will be used to show the two distinct ways in which this occurred.
Applying the ideas of Habermas (1995: 194) reveals that Shandwick PR used this tactic as a form of greenwashing to engineer consent in the public sphere by creating a climate of consensus that would enable the commercial activities of Timberlands to continue, at the same time neutralizing unwanted discussion. The use of symbols and images such as children was deliberate to make it difficult for target publics to understand the advertisement as the promotion of system rationality, because it seems to contradict ideas about what and how it should look and behave. Drawing on the symbolism of the child, which connotes innocence and truth, the advertisement implied overall harmony between business, state and community groups. However a Foucauldian analysis shows that in this case Shandwick also sought to address intrinsic contradictions within a discursive formation and developed statements that were intended in genial ways to lead the subject, through a series of symbols imbued with meanings, into a coherence that supported and naturalized the logic of simple modernity.

In doing this, Shandwick responded to what it believed were surface or intrinsic contradictions, that is, ones occurring inside a discursive formation, by seeking to adjust these for audiences within the public sphere through promotion also known as ‘spin’ and ‘fluff’, but in ways intended not ‘in any way affecting the body of enunciative rules that makes them possible’ (Foucault op cit: 153). In late modern society it is reasonable to suggest that the effect of harmonizing intrinsic contradictions through public relations on a local level is likely to be tolerated by publics. However, depending on the extent to which it takes place, the engineered harmonizing of intrinsic contradictions by public relations is no less socially damaging than the aggressive asphyxiation of extrinsic contradictions. Indeed, Habermas (1995: 195) has shown how the invisible seepage of commercial and political discourses into the public sphere causes its slow, subtle junking that puts at risk critical public opinion shaped by ‘rational agreement between publicly competing opinions’ in a society.

However, a different form of unethical public relations is evident in this excerpt below. According to Hager and Burton (op cit: 165) this poster was distributed that asked West Coast residents:

Do you realise the extreme environmentalists are having an “Adventurous” weekend in Reefton, Queens Birthday weekend, at West Coast peoples expense? ... WHAT MORE DO THEY WANT!!! DON’T LET THEM DESTROY OUR LIVES – If you believe in the survival of the West Coast Future, and would like to join us, please contest Coast Action Network (ibid).

In this example, the use of discourse such as ‘extreme’, ‘destroy’, and ‘survival’ points to the management of extrinsic contradictions. Drawing on Foucault (1972) this shows that public relations responds differently if it believes that statements issued by counter-sources will lead audiences outside the boundaries of the particular discursive formation (ibid: 153). In this case it acts aggressively to suppress and/or discredit the source so that their statements are not distributed or provide alternative statements that lead the subject back into the dominant discourse. QC Rennie referred to this as the PR consultancy’s ‘mindset of conflict’. For example, Shandwick, in a calculated way, intended the statements to be antagonistic and as a result would construct dichotomies such as ‘us and them’ and ‘good and bad’ etc. to stop alternative statements from emerging, so that thought would be funneled back into the bureaucratic and instrumental systems dominant to this point. In relation to extrinsic contradictions, public relations acts like a fence around the dominant discourse promoted by industry and the state, both to keep in the speaking subject and to keep out new statements that might lead them to an alternative
discursive formation (ibid). Furthermore, this case study shows that public relations attempts to asphyxiate extrinsic contradictions set in motion by activists in order to maintain the dominant discourse and ‘restore[s] to its hidden unity’ (ibid: 149).

In summary, the Timberlands case study shows two highly unethical forms of public relations at work which can undermine the public sphere and the agency of individuals to participate fully as active citizens within a democratic society. The proponents used public relations both to suppress and neutralize the contradictions the grassroots activists raised. However overall, this paper argues that it is the extreme ways in which it was used to extinguish the extrinsic contradictions ‘that reflect opposition between distinct discursive formations’ as opposed to the ways it was used to deal with the intrinsic contradictions or ‘those that are deployed in the discursive formation itself’ (Foucault 1972: 153) which makes it highly socially and politically offensive and which raises serious questions for the profession and society.

Implications
Primarily my analysis about the response of public relations to contradictions in these activist debates show the different ways business and state organizations use public relations to suppress the emergence of other coherences and discursive formations. Two styles have been identified: the harmonizing of intrinsic contradictions through spin and the aggressive asphyxiating of extrinsic contradictions.

Significantly, the tensions within the field of public relations, such as those demonstrated in the literature review and in the Timberlands case study between PRINZ and the two members under investigation, can also be explained by Foucault’s ideas around contradictions. He says that intrinsic contradictions such as these point to ‘inadequation of the objects; divergence of enunciative modalities; incompatibility of concepts and an exclusion of theoretical options’ (Foucault 2005: 171-2). This paper examines public relations’ relationship to activism and the extreme actions such as astroturfing and greenwashing which reveal clearly, the object of public relations at its core. It argues this schism points to the inadequacies of ‘PR’ as an object and suggests the divisions within the field cannot be reconciled theoretically within current frameworks. However irregularities such as this also reveal a new discursive formation is present because they are evidence of a new way of thinking that has found different coherences. The challenge is therefore, not to try to reconcile these views but to set in motion a new ethically-driven approach which affects the ordering of objects.

Politically offensive communication practices such as those demonstrated in the Timberlands case study have raised an urgency to examine the role of ethics and public relations in relation to democracy. If we are involved with public relations we cannot help but be tainted by the poor practices of others. Indeed these acts are a source of confusion and of ambiguity that needs to be clarified. The Foucauldian framework adds to the work of Habermas (1995) and provides new analytical tools to identify sub-categories of unethical public relations practice that enable an evaluation of its effects within wider social contexts. In turn this establishes new categorical relations within the field that assist with research and in developing new approaches for practice. For example, Foucault’s ideas show that organizations, to avoid the negative effects of unethical public relations organizations in the public sphere, need to accept a permeation of ideas which open up the possibilities to prevent, minimise and solve problems or socially controversial issues that are by-products of the social production of wealth (Beck 1992). Therefore, in practice, a defining characteristic of ethical communication is that it does not attempt to asphyxiate extrinsic statements outside its discursive formation in order to restore a hidden unity that serves its own organizational self-interest (Foucault 1972: 149-153). Nor does it attempt to harmonize surface or intrinsic contradictions within its discursive formation to create cohesion through symbolism and discourse resulting in the spin and fluff of public relations.

For some people, the relationship between business, politics and the media is formless and its effects on society are difficult to understand and see. Breit (2007: 347) discusses the difficult role that individual journalists and public relations practitioners have within a sometimes inadequate regulatory environment and recommends adopting a ‘broader view of the media’s social responsibility’ because of the wider collective effects this will pass on. Media Social Responsibility (MSR) is defined as the adoption of an ethic in which individuals and groups individuals practise and interact with stakeholder in ways that reflect on ‘honesty, fairness, and respect for the rights of others’ (ibid).

This paper proposes to build on the notion of MSR in order to develop greater theoretical
choices within the field of public relations which will assist the creation of the object of unethical public relations. Drawing on the discussion so far (Breit op cit, Habermas 1995, Foucault op cit, Hager and Burton op cit), MSR could be an approach to professional communication characterized by:

- Permeation of ideas which open up the possibility of alternative strategies that are capable of leading to a new discursive formation (Foucault op cit).
- A systematic attempt to integrate notions of managing contradictions to address conceptual weaknesses within the current codes of ethics (Breit op cit: 308).
- Interaction with intra-organizational public sphere, goal-oriented within the prevailing social governance systems to develop meaningful exchanges between social and state organizations and institutions and the pursuit of the ideal that it is possible to dilute the antagonism between social groups and promote mutual satisfaction and critical public opinion (Habermas op cit: 248).

Conclusion

Foucault's theories of the unities of discourse and the formation of objects, enunciative modalities, concepts and strategies and the function of statements shed light on how individual subjects are constrained in their agency to effect change. His work shows a new level on which language interacts to form relationships that, in turn, affects social action. The notion of the ‘individual’ who determines history through sheer Herculean self-will is upturned by Foucault's analysis. In its place, the subject, mostly unaware of a great repository of discourse from which they can draw, hybridize and construct – objects, unities, and concepts – to form and disperse statements, transferring them into new modalities and other codes, invisibly shaping them as seemingly natural speaking positions.

Foucault gives the critical tools to see how the public relations industry creates discourse to control and manipulate the process of discursive formation. Public relations, using tools such as greenwashing and astroturfing within the public sphere, artificially creates and disperses objects, statements and concepts in concentrations that inflate their particular discourses to the extent that others are overwhelmed. The result is a discursive monoculture for society. Clearly, unscrupulous communication practices such as those demonstrated in the Timberlands case study have entrenched tensions between activists and the public relations industry, but moreover, they are also counter-productive for the organizations involved. If businesses continue to apply simple approaches in their public relations when dealing with resistance from activist groups, they will not only contribute to significant social havoc through conflict and antagonism but they will waste the collective resources of the state and risk their long-term business viability.

In this paper, I have discussed socially and politically offensive forms of public relations and the tensions within the field itself which need urgent attention. I believe that reconciling these issues requires innovation and a synthetic approach, drawing on a range of interdisciplinary social, political, communicative and discourse theories, to identify coherences in order to develop a conceptual analysis that leads to new understandings of these relationships. This critical view of public relations also reflects Foucault's ideas that unities should only be accepted if they are subject to interrogation and found to be sound. He argues once ideas about unities are questioned ‘an entire field is set free’ (Foucault op cit: 26). It is beyond the scope of this paper to do much more than map out some of this territory for renewal in the field. However, I speculate that if such a more rigorous communicative approach moved from the margins to the mainstream, then regulatory frameworks in the profession could be strengthened, taxonomies and sub-categories in the analysis of unethical public relations could be developed, greater sanctions for wrong doing in public relations by individuals and the organizations they represent and their effects on citizens in the public sphere could be described and understood to produce knowledge, counter ignorance and provide the tools for change.

References


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Note on Contributor
Dr Kristin Demetrious is a lecturer in the School of Communication and Creative Arts, Faculty of Arts and Education, at Deakin University. She is an experienced media and communication practitioner who has operated her own consultancy, and at various times, worked in house as a publicist, video producer and public relations administrator. She also has a background in activism and community work and in 2003 received the Federal Centenary Medal in recognition of her contributions over ten years in urban greening and placemaking projects. Kristin’s PhD focused on communication in sub-political movements and in public relations and her research is published in Australia and in the UK. This paper was first presented at the Radical PR Roundtable held at the University of Stirling, Scotland in 2008. Telephone +61 3 52271269; Facsimile +61 3 52272484; email: kristin.demetrious@deakin.edu.au.