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A toolbox for public relations: The oeuvre of Michel Foucault

Judith Motion

University of Wollongong, jmotion@uow.edu.au

S. R. Leitch

University of Wollongong, sleitch@uow.edu.au

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In this article, we provide a brief introduction to the work of Michel Foucault. Our focus is on the major themes of Foucault's work: discourse, power/knowledge and subjectivity. We demonstrate the rich contribution that Foucauldian theory can make to public relations practice and scholarship by moving beyond a focus on excellence towards an understanding of public relations as a discourse practice with power effects.

Keywords

public relations, discourse, power, Foucault

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A toolbox for public relations: The *oeuvre* of Michel Foucault

Professor Judy Motion

School of Management and Marketing

Faculty of Commerce

University of Wollongong

NSW 2522

Australia

motionjm@waikato.ac.nz

Professor Shirley Leitch

Dean of Commerce

University of Wollongong

NSW 2522

Australia

sleitch@uow.edu.au

+61 2 4221 5080 work

+61 2 4221 4157 fax

+61 4 448 216032

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Abstract

In this article, we provide a brief introduction to the work of Michel Foucault. Our focus is on the major themes of Foucault's work: discourse, power/knowledge and subjectivity. We demonstrate the rich contribution that Foucauldian theory can make to public relations practice and scholarship by moving beyond a focus on excellence towards an understanding of public relations as a discourse practice with power effects.

Keywords: Foucault, discourse, power/knowledge, subjectivity, agency.

1. Introduction

I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area... I write for users, not readers (Foucault. 1974, pp. 523-524).

Michel Foucault's work provides an intellectual toolbox for theorising the role of public relations in constructing and transforming societal discourses and practices. It poses considerable challenges for those who would seek simply to valorise or condemn the practice of public relations. Instead, the use of Foucault's work highlights some of the deeply problematic, contradictory and even questionable aspects of this complex profession by placing meaning production, power effects, truth claims and knowledge

systems at the centre of our thinking and investigations. Thus, a Foucauldian discourse perspective highlights the production of meanings, the strategies of power and the propagation of knowledge (Foucault, 1978).

As Chair of 'The History of Systems of Thought' at the College de France, Michel Foucault was interested in the systems of thought or sets of knowledges that produce how we think about and understand the world (Rabinow, 1997). Foucault problematized long term socio-cultural and political trends focusing on particular concepts, searching not for continuity, but for shifts and rupture points in order to identify 'displacements and transformations of concepts' (Foucault, 1972, p. 4), moments of discontinuity and change in political, economic, institutional and societal practices. Problematizing change offers a potential research approach for interrogating and investigating public relations (Motion, 2005). Although his viewpoints developed and changed, Foucault's work is generally understood to comprise three interlinked conceptual/critical themes: discourse, power/knowledge and subjectivity.

Within this paper we discuss the central concepts and tenets of Foucault's work, reflect on potential applications of Foucault's work for public relations scholarship and highlight a number of tensions that emerge from a Foucauldian consideration of public relations. In particular, we focus on the ways in which Foucault's work may be applied to issues of change.

2. Problematization

A critique, according to Foucault, is not simply a matter of saying things are not right but 'a matter of pointing out what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar,

unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices we accept rest' (Foucault, 1988, p. 154). Foucault (1984) challenged scholars to think differently about problems and referred to the technique that he used to ask 'tough questions' as problematization. Problematization is a technique of posing questions, of reflecting on and accounting for how certain systems of thought and practices come to be conceived in a particular way, highlighting paradoxes, difficulties and 'the conditions in which human beings "problematize" what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live' (Foucault, 1984, p. 10). The starting point was a problem to be interrogated within its social, political and epistemological context. Foucault (1996) explained that he was interested in how discourses and associated practices came to be accepted as true or legitimate and become objects for thought.

For public relations scholars, problematization offers a technique for questioning and interrogating the role of public relations in society. An advantage of problematization is that it does not attempt to regulate what may be studied or how it may be studied, but rather opens up the field of investigation. For example, a paradoxical problem that could be investigated is: how is it that positive public relations efforts are excluded from common conceptualisations of public relations, yet negative conceptualizations prevail?

Our scholarship in public relations has been guided by the Foucauldian notion of problematization. We initially sought to understand the limits of the symmetrical model with its organizational orientation and find other ways of interpreting what appeared to be a more complex and differentiated practice. A Foucauldian approach led us to place discourse and power at the centre of our scholarship and investigations. We now explore

the three major interlinked conceptual themes of Foucault's work: discourse, power/knowledge and subjectivity.

3. Discourse production and transformation

Within this section we turn to Foucault's work on discourse production and transformation and discuss its salience for public relations scholarship. For Foucault (1972), discourse was embodied in sets of statements that formed the objects, concepts, subjects and strategies of which they spoke. Foucault explained that discourses are 'governed by analysable rules and transformations' (1972, p. 211) and can be identified according to the rules of formation for all of the objects, concepts, subjects and strategies within the discourses. These rules constituted 'systems of thought' that determined what could be said, who could speak, the positions from which they could speak, the viewpoints that could be presented, and the interests, stakes and institutional domains that were represented. Foucault (1984, p.12) explained that his approach was to search for 'instances of discursive production', 'the production of power' and 'the propagation of knowledge'. We discuss Foucault's conceptualisation of the relationship between power and knowledge in the next section.

A discourse inquiry leads to the following problematization – what is public relations and how is it that we have come to think about public relations in this way? From a discourse perspective, the starting point for analyzing this problem is to conceptualize public relations as a meaning creation process with ideational, relational and identity functions (see Fairclough, 1992). From a Foucauldian perspective, we would contend that the ideational function of public relations is to influence the concepts and

systems of thought that shape how we think about things. The relational function of public relations would refer to the construction of power relationships between discourse actors or 'stakeholders'. The identity function of public relations would refer to the creation and transformation of the subject positions available to actors within discourse. How we analyze these functions of public relations would then depend upon whether we perceived public relations to be a business or management practice, an art, a science, a societal good or a societal evil.

Discourses may be contested, resisted or transformed by any discourse actor (Hardy, Palmer and Phillips, 2000; Hardy and Phillips 1999) but this work often falls to public relations practitioners. Discourse transformations involve the creation of new rules 'separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable' (Foucault 1972: 197). Although fragments of the former discourse may remain, the underlying systems of thought and discourse rules are changed. Changes in discourse, according to Foucault, can be determined by mapping the displacement of boundaries, the new positions and roles made available for speaking subjects in the discourse, new modes of language, and new forms for circulating the discourse.

Fairclough's (1992) Foucauldian analysis of discourse transformation conceptualised deliberate attempts to transform discourse in order to engineer socio-cultural change as the 'technologization of discourse' by 'professional technologists who research, redesign, and provide training in discourse practices' (p. 8). Motion and Leitch (1996) drew upon Foucault and Fairclough's work on discourse technologization to theorise the role and practices of public relations practitioners in struggles to transform discourse and thus change sociocultural practices. Motion (2005) also deployed a

Foucauldian lens to critique government attempts to transform a national economic discourse and the public relations practices that engage stakeholders in participative processes with predetermined outcomes.

Foucault's work on discourse has been extensively applied by organizational scholars to analyse organizational issues and problems. The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse (Grant, Hardy, Oswick and Putnam, 2004) provides a comprehensive overview of recent work in this area. We contend that Foucault's work on discourse has the potential to make a similar impact on public relations scholarship. We now discuss Foucault's conceptualization of the relationship between power/knowledge and truth.

4. Power/Knowledge and Truth

Power, as a central idea of political discourse, often carries negative connotations of domination. However, for Foucault (1980) power was both positive and productive:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse (p. 119).

The exercise of power, Foucault argued, not only offered positive benefits to individuals and society but underlay all aspects of human existence. Foucault, then, was interested in the sites of modern power, the forms it took and the ways in which it was exercised. He was also interested in the interrelationship between power and knowledge.

Foucault (1980) challenged the accepted view that knowledge was power, a view which saw knowledge as a scarce resource that conferred power on those who possessed it. In contrast, Foucault argued for the inseparability of power and knowledge:

The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. The university hierarchy is only the most visible ... and least dangerous form of this phenomenon. One has to be really naïve to imagine that the effects of power linked to knowledge have their culmination in university hierarchies. Diffused, entrenched and dangerous, they operate in other places than in the person of the old professor. (Foucault, 1980, p. 52)

Knowledge was, then, both a creator of power and a creation of power. Similarly, power was both a creator of knowledge and a creation of knowledge. The two concepts were inseparable and for this reason, Foucault coined the conjoint concept of 'power/knowledge'. In the above quote, Foucault also drew attention to the diffusion of power/knowledge throughout society. Academic knowledge, the preserve of 'old professors' was only one and, in Foucault's opinion, the least harmful institutional site of the power/knowledge relationship. Foucault's (1972, 1974) work on the history of hospitals, prisons and asylums for the mentally ill were all centrally concerned with the operation of power/knowledge.

Foucault conceptualized power/knowledge as both organized and hierarchical within the context of clusters of relationships. The notion of power/knowledge as relational was clarified by adding the element of strategy. That is, Foucault (1980) saw individuals and organizations as deploying various discourse strategies to conform with, circumvent, or contest existing power/knowledge relations. From this perspective,

discourse may be seen as providing the vehicle through which power/knowledge circulates and discourse strategies as the means by which the relations of power/knowledge are created, maintained, resisted and transformed (Clegg, Courpasson, and Phillips, 2006; Davenport and Leitch, 2005). Clearly, public relations practitioners are central actors in these power/knowledge processes through their role as discourse technologists (Fairclough, 1992; Motion and Leitch, 1996).

When public relations practitioners deploy successful discourse strategies, the resulting discursive change may achieve hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) status; in that it becomes so pervasive that it is perceived as common sense. For example, public relations played a major role in the shift from a Keynesian to a neo-liberal economic hegemony and in the accompanying ideological shift in western societies during the last decades of the twentieth century (Hall and Jacques, 1989).

Hegemony is a macro-level concept that is applied to systems of thought that arise from particular societal configurations of power/knowledge relationships. At a more micro-level, the power/knowledge relationship may be seen to operate through the production and acceptance of particular truths. Foucault's (1988) problematization of truth has intriguing implications for public relations work:

Indeed, truth is no doubt a form of power. And in saying that I am only taking up one of the fundamental problems of western philosophy when it poses these questions: 'Why in fact, are we attached to truth? Why the truth rather than lies? Why the truth rather than myth? Why the truth rather than illusion? And I think that, instead of trying to find out what truth, as opposed to error, is, it might be more

interesting to take up the problem posed by Nietzsche: how is it that, in our societies, 'the truth' has been given this value, thus placing us in its thrall? (p. 107).

Public relations practitioners have frequently been accused of not being attached to the truth (Stauber and Rampton, 1995; Toth and Heath, 1992). In the above quote, Foucault raises a much deeper question as to why we should be attached to the truth. From a Foucauldian perspective, one would argue that the attachment to truth is central to the power/knowledge relationship. Particular knowledges gain the status of truths by virtue of their relationship to power. For example, by virtue of the power vested in them by the legal system, judges may pass a guilty verdict on the accused and thereby establish the truth of that guilt. In accepting the guilty verdict as truth, society then reinforces the power of the legal system. Thus, we would contend that rather than being detached from truth, public relations has a central attachment to establishing and reinforcing particular truths.

Through their deployment of discursive strategies, public relations practitioners play a central role in shaping power/knowledge relations, which raises the fundamental question – what is the role of public relations in society? Employing a critical discourse lens in public relations research, we are able to explore this question by problematizing the role of public relations practitioners as they attempt to establish particular truths and alter power/knowledge relations. In the next section we explore Foucault's theory of subjectivity and the role that subjects play within discourse.

5. Agency versus subjectivity

Agency theories place an emphasis on the ability of individual and collective discourse actors to effect change. In contrast, theories of subjectivity emphasize the structural elements of discourse that place limits on agency and thereby serve to reinforce existing relations of power/knowledge (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). Foucault originally saw subjects as being created or constituted through discourse but in his later work, Foucault (1988) began to examine the technologies through which individuals constituted and transformed themselves as subjects. This interest in the constitution of the subject can be traced from his series on *The history of sexuality* to his work on *Technologies of the self*. Scholars drawing upon Foucault's work often over-emphasize this dialectic of objectivity versus subjectivity, primarily focusing on the way that discourse constrains agency and limits how discourse subjects constitute and transform themselves. Yet, even within his work on power it is possible to see that Foucault (1980) shifted to an acceptance of agency, in particular to the notion that power resides within relationships and that where there is power, there is always potential for resistance. Thus, from a Foucauldian perspective, individuals have the potential to choose beyond the range of subject positions offered within a discourse: 'Everybody both acts and thinks' (Foucault, 1988, p. 14). Foucault's work on recreating the self can be deployed to theorize and critique the role of public relations practitioners in identity work for individuals or organizations.

Personal public relations: branding the self

Foucault (1982) espoused self constitution and transformation, in contrast to a Cartesian notion of an essential or unified self. Foucault (1982) stated:

From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art' (p. 351).

The notion of constituting the self as a work of art fits neatly with the concept of personal public relations or branding the self. Public relations practitioners may assist individuals to undertake identity work such as personal public relations or personal branding of the self (Motion, 1999; 2000). In this work, public relations practitioners have been identified as playing both formative and advisory roles. Within the formative mode, practitioners actively form the public identity whereas within the advisory mode practitioners offer advice on how to discursively position the self (Motion, 1999) but the identity work is undertaken by the subject. These technologized identities, then, may be conceptualized as commodities to be positioned within and promoted through discourse.

The notion of the self as a commodity raises the key questions 'what is the authentic self' and 'is there an essential self'? Here Foucault's (1984) work on the role of an ideal of conduct and an ethic of the self would prove useful with personal ethics and values forming the core of the discursive positioning strategies adopted. In this way Foucault's work offers both an agenda and a justification for ethical personal public relations work.

Technologies of the self

Foucault explained that there are four discourse 'technologies' that allow people to understand and transform themselves: technologies of production, sign systems, power and the self. Each of these technologies comprises sets of discourse practices.

Technologies of production 'permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things' (Foucault, 1988, p. 18) and contribute to the constitution of identity. Foucault referred to

the discourse strategies and practices that construct meanings as technologies of sign systems that ‘permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols or significations’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Foucault’s technologies of power ‘determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). In terms of identity, for example, such technologies create sets of rules and norms for controlling and regulating identities. Technologies of the self ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immobility’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Technologies of power are imposed whereas technologies of the self are chosen by subjects to construct, modify or transform identity.

Foucault’s discourse technology framework has been applied to critique the traditional approaches to corporate identity and develop a new model for understanding corporate identity (Motion and Leitch, 2002). The technologies framework could, in addition, be more broadly applied within public relations scholarship to understand how strategy and change practices are developed and implemented.

6. Conclusion and Implications for Research and Practice

Foucault (1974) described his work as a toolbox for use by other scholars. In this article we have given only a glimpse of the riches to be found within this toolbox and would argue that, in this sense, Foucault’s oeuvre is more treasure chest than toolbox. Public relations scholars and practitioners can benefit equally from an understanding of the insights of a theorist who challenged us to ‘know how and to what extent it might be

possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known' (Foucault, 1984). Unlike many other critical theorists, Foucault's work was not limited to simply taking apart the ideas offered by others. Rather, he offered new insights, new ways of understanding and making sense of the world.

By integrating Foucault's insights into our work as scholars and practitioners, we move beyond a focus on excellence and onto thinking about how public relations works and why it works. Foucault's work challenges us to problematize the role that public relations practitioners play within democratic societies, particularly in their role as discourse technologists. In doing so, we place the power/knowledge nexus at the centre of our thinking (Leitch and Neilson, 2001). Conceptualized from a power/knowledge perspective, public relations shifts from the discourse domain of business, where it is understood as a commercial practice, to the discourse domain of politics, where it is understood as a power effect that produces and circulates certain kinds of truths.

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