

Participative public relations: Power to the people or legitimacy for government discourse?

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Abstract

This article adopts a Foucauldian lens to critique public relations practices that engage stakeholders in participative processes with predetermined outcomes. It contests the popular notion that the role of public relations is to minimize or diffuse conflict, arguing that such efforts are in fact manifestations of power designed to legitimate the discourses, power and positions of the dominant coalition. The analysis concentrates on attempts to transform a national economic discourse at the *Catching the Knowledge Wave Conference*, held in New Zealand. It illustrates how a government–university alliance deployed public relations to gain legitimacy for economic change with the business community and more generally, New Zealand citizens.

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1. Introduction

This paper argues that public relations should have as a guiding principle Foucault's (1984) challenge, "to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known" (p. 9). A Foucauldian lens offers the freedom to confront and contest widely held views and develop alternative modes of thinking about public relations. Traditionally, much effort has been put into promoting public relations, as practiced by corporations and governments, as a social good that seeks to engage stakeholders and thereby diffuse and minimise conflict. However, in contrast, this paper seeks to problematize idealized notions of stakeholder engagement and participation. It highlights the power relations at play and calls for public relations engagement processes to acknowledge vested interests, recognize conflict, and encourage marginalized critical discourses. Concentrating on a discursive event, the *Catching the Knowledge Wave* conference, this article critiques how participative processes and discourse strategies are used to normalize and legitimate a political economy discourse transformation.

2. Public relations as a discourse technology

A Foucauldian approach may be broadly characterised by a rejection of traditional conceptualizations of power and a concern with the discursive. Foucault (1980) did not conceive of power as only engendered from the top downwards; rather, power was understood to reside in a network of relationships that depended upon the "production,

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accumulation, circulating and functioning of a discourse” (p. 93). For Foucault (1972), at the simplest level, discourse may be understood as a set of statements, a signifying ensemble of practices that “systematically forms the objects of which they speak” (p. 49).

In talking about discursive practices, Foucault was referring to the way discourses constitute how we come to think about things in a certain way and govern how we speak about things. From a discourse perspective, public relations practitioners are understood to advocate particular meanings and understandings by “separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable” (Foucault, 1980, p. 197). Public relations practitioners also deploy discourse to determine and reconfigure complex groups of power relations. The use of public relations is therefore never disinterested.

The article examines the use of public relations strategies for discursively engaging with stakeholders by questioning the Habermasian concept of deliberative democracy. Habermas (1991) envisioned an idealized public sphere in which citizens legitimate positions by presenting and justifying views in a public forum which appeal to the common interest and, as a consequence, subsequent decision making then reflects a rational, agreed-upon, common good. This article rejects idealized participative processes, likening them to the symmetrical dialogical approach (see Grunig, 2001; Roper, 2005). These participative processes are contrasted with Rehg and Bohman’s (2002) post-Habermasian view of a “moral compromise” (p. 51) in which individuals can cooperate from their own diverse perspectives but do not have to reach agreement or unanimity. The concepts of idealized participation and symmetry are replaced in this study by the term “participative public relations” in order to explicitly examine discourse transformation and attempts to involve stakeholders in decision-making processes without necessarily conceding power.

3. Critical discourse analysis method

Critical scholars question and interrogate the role of public relations in society. Problematization is a technique for posing questions about “the set of discursive or nondiscursive practices that makes something enter into the play of true and false, and constitutes it as an object for thought” (Foucault, 1996, pp. 456–457). This paper draws upon the notion of problematization to critique the engagement process deployed to discursively reposition the economy. The analysis focuses on the formation, modification, and transformation of meaning, as well as the rules defining what may be said. It accounts for the fact that an economic discourse is introduced, talked about, and naturalized. It examines what power relations are at stake, the vested interests, and the formation of alliances during a public relations event.

The *Catching the Knowledge Wave* Conference, undertaken jointly by the New Zealand government and the University of Auckland, sought to position knowledge as a central tenet of the New Zealand economy. It also signaled a government reprioritization in which the economy took equal priority with social concerns. From that joint agenda, this study explored three aspects: (1) how public relations was deployed to engage stakeholders in the discursive transformation of knowledge and the formulation of public opinion; (2) how knowledge was constituted, recognized, and organized as central to the economic development of New Zealand; and (3) how participative public relations reconfigures power relations.

4. Historical context: political economy

Discourses are historically, politically and socially situated. As contexts change, discourse boundaries move and consequently influence “alignments of power and political resistance” (Rouse, 1993, p. 162). An earlier significant transformation occurred in the 1980s when New Zealand adopted an extensive set of free market reforms (Kelsey, 1997; Roper, Holtz-Bacha, & Mazzoleni, 2004). Fairclough (2003) used the term “new capitalism” to describe such economic liberalization and privatization reforms. He contended that such transformations restructure relations between the economic, political, and social domains and require obeisance to the emerging logic of a “globalizing knowledge-driven economy” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 4).

Although a previous New Zealand Labour Government had instigated the transformation to “new capitalism,” in 1999 a newly elected Labour Government set out to reverse some of the free market reforms and to initiate a more interventionist style of government. These economic interventions resulted in the Government being perceived as anti-business, which led it to embark on a campaign to improve its relationship with business and to demonstrate its commitment to improving the New Zealand economy. It initiated a series of consultative processes, including thinktanks and taskforces, to engage business in policy development.

As part of this process, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Helen Clark, and Dr John Hood, Vice Chancellor of the University of Auckland launched the *Catching the Knowledge Wave* conference, 1–3 August, 2001, as a public relations event to develop a shared vision for the future of New Zealand. Clearly this involved vested interests. For the government, the alliance with the university provided academic credibility and legitimacy for the event, and served to minimize accusations that it was just a political public relations manoeuvre. For the university, it was a more sophisticated form of public relations. The involvement could be interpreted in two ways: either as a genuine attempt at participative public relations that sought stakeholder contributions; or as a cynical attempt to gain government favor, increase funding, garner positive publicity, and position the university as a key power broker in New Zealand. It also offered the university an opportunity to establish itself as part of a dominant coalition (see Berger, 2005) and as central to the transformation to a knowledge economy. However, it is important to note that the involvement of a university in legitimizing an ideological and economic transformation fundamentally challenges the role of a university as an independent critic for society.

5. The discursive rules and boundaries

In order to understand the power relations at work, a discourse analysis has to consider who may speak and what positions are represented. Hood (2001a) described the presenters as “leading thinkers, business people, civil servants and politicians from other parts of the world . . . who themselves have been active as participants, advisors, thinkers and leaders in and about economic and social change and transformation” (for a full list see www.knowledgewave.org.nz). These international presenters may be understood as promoting a form of globalized imperialism by advocating economic restructuring.

The conference attendees included politicians, business people, educators, scientists, academics, the judiciary, and community representatives. Attendees had the opportunity to participate during the plenary question times and the theme workshops. New Zealand citizens could follow the conference via print and televised media, and participate in an internet discussion. However, the televised broadcast was by “Sky TV” a pay television service, which clearly placed some restriction on who could access the conference. Therefore, although access to the discourse was wide, only a select few were able to participate. Those attending the event could be directly influenced and support the dominant coalition by promoting the discourse transformation.

A discourse may be identified by the rules that define its boundaries and what Foucault (1991) terms the “things said” (p. 63). At the opening of the conference, Hood (2001a) described the origin of the knowledge theme as the 1999 general election in which the Labour Party of New Zealand had talked of a “Knowledge Society”, and the New Zealand National Party of a “Knowledge Economy.” The Labour Party is generally viewed as occupying a centrist left political position whereas the National Party is viewed as centrist right (Roper et al., 2004). The Labour Party promotes “democratic socialism and economic and social cooperation” (The Labour Party of New Zealand, 2005) and, in contrast, the National Party emphasizes individual freedom, personal responsibility and “competitive enterprise and rewards for achievement” (New Zealand National Party, 2005). These different discourse positions are reflected in the Labour Party’s use of the term “knowledge society” compared to the National Party’s use of “knowledge economy.”

The purpose of the conference was to identify a national strategy “to enable New Zealand’s transition to a competitive knowledge society” (Knowledgewave, 2001). The rationale for the focus was that knowledge was the new currency of social and economic wealth replacing old forms of wealth. For New Zealand, a country traditionally reliant on commodity exports, such a change would have immense ramifications and require broad acceptance from business. Conference presenters received these specific guidelines from the Vice-Chancellor describing the discourse boundaries: “Shaping the national agenda for New Zealand in order to move from an economy based on resources to one based on knowledge and human capital, from reliance on commodities to an engagement with a global economy” (Meltzer, 2001). Transforming the economy and normalizing globalization were thus established as central agendas for the conference.

Prime Minister Clark (2001a) explained that the Labour Party’s broad vision was to reposition New Zealand in the top half of the OECD. However, for her, the focus on economic performance was unequivocally linked to social provision:

It is vital that social inclusion and cohesion are key themes of this conference. For me, the benefit of catching the knowledge wave will be measured not only through the economic indicators, but also by the sense of social

wellbeing and security which results. We will not hoist ourselves back into the top half of the league of developed nations if a significant minority is left behind . . . Economic and social policy must be integrated to achieve that, and to achieve outcomes which are uniquely New Zealand (Clark, 2001b).

In this way, Prime Minister Clark attempted to frame the discourse boundaries: the economy was not to be considered as a separate entity. Rather, the economy and social provision were being explicitly articulated to provide a rationale and justification for the focus on economics and the discursive shift in which the economy is prioritized by the Labour Party. The discourse boundaries were thus established as focusing on economy, but explicitly articulated with, and complemented by, social concerns. Economic and social discourses were to be major frames to view New Zealand's future. In this way, the agenda was pre-determined and restricted, thus indicating a type of discursive closure (Deetz, 1998). Participative public relations may of course have a pre-established agenda, but in order to reach a moral compromise it must retain the potential for readjustment or revision (Rehg & Bohman, 2002).

The term used to establish the discourse practice at the conference was "engagement." Engagement was a participative public relations strategy that sought to include and win over business. Hood (2001a) explained the rules of engagement thus: "no matter how passionately or ideologically committed you feel about matters under discussion and debate . . . interact with conference colleagues in a collegial, respectful, concise and (as far as possible) empirically accurate manner." Accordingly, although the conference rationale was founded on ideological and vested interests, conference participants were required to set aside such interests.

This discourse practice is based on the idealized notion underpinning deliberative democracy that to be effective, engagement must minimize or downplay conflict and is predicated on the assumption that power relations may be set aside. However, for public relations this is a risky strategy because although it offers a short-term impression of agreement and consensus, in the long-term interests and conflict cannot be suppressed. Indeed, Mouffe (1999) has commented that free and unconstrained public deliberation is a conceptual impossibility without conflict and argues that a "democratic society makes room for the expression of conflicting interests and values" (p. 756). The public relations challenge, then, is to bring together multiple conflicting interests, take account of power relations, and achieve a consensus, moral compromise, or resolution.

6. Discourse transformation: the way the economy is "put into discourse"

The discourses deployed to discuss the future of New Zealand at the conference may be broadly categorized as economic, social, cultural, and political. Although Prime Minister Clark had attempted to establish discourse parameters, epistemic contestation between the economic and the social was an ongoing feature of the conference. Different articulations of the term "knowledge" indicated conflict between political positions. Knowledge was articulated with both economic and social terms. Economic articulations included "knowledge economy"; "knowledge capital markets"; "knowledge-intensive industries," and "knowledge-primed economy." In contrast, others talked in more social terms of a "knowledge society", "knowledge-based society" or a "knowledge nation." Within this tension a distinct discourse struggle is evident. The Labour Party and Prime Minister Clark attempted to ensure that certain policy directions succeeded in gaining legitimacy and popular acceptance by articulating old and new ways of thinking, old and new political positions. However, what was clearly at stake in this discursive contestation was not positioning knowledge as central to the economy, but the role of the economy in promoting social good.

Economists provided overviews of economic theory and particular economic paradigms that supported the discourse transformation and appeared to be line with the economic and social objectives of the Labour government. Porter (2001) of the Harvard Business School argued that there was no inherent conflict between the economic and the social: he expressed "social" in terms of workforce productivity, and the need for citizens "to succeed in the market system," although he also stated that "Economic policies must include explicit programs to raise human capability and improve lives and the sense of opportunity for citizens." On a similar tack, after explaining that New Zealand had "slid from 9th in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) 'rankings' in 1970 to 20th in 1999," Brash (2001), the then Governor of the Reserve Bank, repeatedly linked economic growth and social progress:

If we want better housing, better health care and better education we certainly need economic growth . . . if we want to retain a relatively egalitarian society, we absolutely need economic growth . . . even if we want more attention paid to preserving our natural environment we need growth.

Articulating social progress with an economic discourse in this way was a justificatory device for economic change rather than a socially motivated discourse and served to highlight the discursive contest between economic and social rationales.

In contrast, Teece (2001) of the Haas School of Business at University of California, provided a critique of neo-classical growth theory and argued for an improvement in the macro-economic environment, stating “Open and liberal commercial regimes will facilitate development and productivity growth” (p. 18). This emphasis on growth and productivity as the solution to remedying economic decline did not incorporate a social discourse. Hood (2001b), similarly, recognized the importance of growth as part of New Zealand’s economic strategy:

We need all New Zealanders to understand that they will only be better off on all dimensions, that we will only “create Kiwi prosperity”, the by-line of the Conference, if we do achieve a step-change in our economic growth performance.

The prioritization of economic growth indicated a fundamental conflict with the social motives underpinning Prime Minister Clark’s agenda for the economic transformation. Others in the conference developed the discursive argument further. Shelton-Colby (2001), Deputy Secretary-General (OECD), explained that the findings of an OECD Growth Project indicated that the key factor in economic growth is productivity and she recommended emphasizing innovation and technology diffusion, human capital enhancement, firm creation, and entrepreneurship. It can be argued that this growth approach and its underpinnings function as advocacy for a particular set of macro and micro economic practices that are suggestive of a schism between the pluralistic economic-social agenda advocated by Prime Minister Clark, and the new capitalism economic perspective. What appears to be consensus is at the level of economic progress and the role of knowledge in the economy, but there is little discussion or consensus about social progress.

All of these presentations served to promote particular economic paradigms, agendas and, equally important, functioned to “ensure that new meanings are distributed and that discourse participants ‘speak’ the new language” (Motion & Leitch, 1996, p. 306). The circulation of new meanings is a crucial part of discourse transformation; changing the way that people speak about things aims to change attitudes and knowledge. In this instance, the participants were being introduced to economic paradigms and theory to create shared “zones of meaning” (Heath, 1997, p. 43) so that they could engage in the discourse and draw upon economic perspectives. Rather than a participative process that sparked multiple perspectives, the use of economic experts was indicative of a controlled form of public relations advocacy. The advocacy attempted to influence outcomes by providing a selection of ideas and rational arguments in favour of new capitalism discourses. However, in order to gain acceptance of a discourse transformation, it may be necessary to offer a variety of rational arguments or reasons as a condition of successful moral compromise. A participative event can thus offer justification or legitimacy for a particular policy direction, but a variety of arguments or discourse positions can also serve to highlight or mask irreconcilable conflict.

7. Discourse resistance: the marginalized social discourses

Marginalized or critical discourses form an important part of a discourse transformation, offering opportunities to discuss alternative views, to counter arguments that are a source of conflict and to provide an indication of accepted or “reasonable disagreements” (Rehg & Bohman, 2002, p. 50). They may also provide an assurance or impression of inclusivity for marginalized discourses. Former judge and respected Maori leader, Brown (2001), acknowledged the challenge of articulating the fragmented elements of a national identity in stating that “New Zealandness, difficult though it is to define, is crucial to our future.” Brown (2001) advocated a significant alternative discourse, which incorporated spiritual and cultural perspectives for the future of New Zealand:

My belief is that unless the presence of the spiritual side to an organisation or to a state is acknowledged and recognised, positive social change will be short lived. Mainstream western culture has generally lost its rootedness in a spiritual dimension and the values that encompass that . . . Does the New Zealand response to these forces have to put up with an ideology which would have us compete at every level creating a wasteland of losers and shrinking elite of powerful winners?

In clearly positioning New Zealand’s future as linked to social and spiritual issues, Brown acted as a counter-balance to the economic discourse and also provided a discursive reminder of the government’s commitment to societal values. However, it may be questioned whether in fact such a critical discourse was indeed a real alternative

to the economic agenda. Brown (2001) cautioned against globalization, arguing that “By definition a global society is probably antithetical to concepts of national identity or cultures, let alone concepts of plural cultures within one nation.” In this way, the need for New Zealand to be mindful of its bicultural status and multicultural nature was reiterated. Nevertheless, Clark (2001c) concluded that globalization had to be accepted, and reaffirmed commitment to a globalized knowledge economy. So although a participative process was taking place, the government direction was obviously pre-established. The risk, from a public relations perspective, is that pre-established directions create cynicism about participative events and a reluctance to participate in future events.

Max (2001), a “social entrepreneur,” advocated for “Maori and Pacific people who seek culture-specific provision and redistribution of power and resources.” Although there were such explicit references to the importance of New Zealand’s bicultural and multicultural responsibilities, generally it was a marginalized discourse. As invited plenary speakers Brown and Max were accorded “epistemic authority” (Gieryn, 1999, p. 1) but their presentations were representative of marginalized discourse positions, not part of the dominant economic discourse. The presence of marginalized discourses is crucial to the functioning of participative public relations and democratic ideals but may be subject to accusations of tokenism if participation does not go beyond consultation to influence and power in the decision making process.

8. Participative workshops

The conference ended with a series of workshops that sought participants’ recommendations on five themes: innovation and creativity, people and capability, sustainable economic strategies, entrepreneurship and social dynamism, and knowledge opportunities. Although the working sessions were ostensibly to seek consensus and commitment for economic and social prosperity, economic and social issues were dealt with separately. The participation was carefully framed and controlled: readings were distributed before the conference, speakers were selected to address the workshops, and the workshop objectives were pre-established. The participants were asked for their views on how to create a knowledge economy—not whether that was an appropriate direction for New Zealand. Thus, the participative opportunity may have offered an occasion to explore ideas and make suggestions but within a pre-determined outcome—New Zealand was to become a knowledge economy.

In this way, the knowledge economy entered public consciousness and discussion. At the conclusion of the conference both Prime Minister Clark and Vice-Chancellor Hood commented on common themes but not on the contest between economically and socially driven solutions. Because the conflict was not directly addressed, neither a consensus nor a moral compromise could be reached. Clark (2001c) concluded the conference stating that participants would leave “feeling energised by the spirit in this room and the need to just get on and do it,” but what exactly that action was to be was not determined.

9. Conclusions

At the conference, the attempts to normalize and legitimate the discourse transformation and reconfigure power relations were superficially successful. Knowledge was positioned as crucial to the economy, but economic and social progress were politically oppositional discourses whose conflicting aspects were minimized in favour of garnering popular support for the government and its policy direction. The participative public relations secured popular recognition of the government’s legitimacy and restored more positive relationships with business. The university established positive relations with government and business and the conference served to legitimate and re-privilege the role of the university in knowledge production. It may also be argued that the event established a more positive international reputation and significant relationships for New Zealand through its high profile attempts to endorse new capitalism ideology. Participative public relations, in this instance, is understood to politically and ideologically engage stakeholders to normalize, to legitimate, and to transform discourse, and reconfigure power relations.

However, in 2003, at a second *Knowledge Wave* conference the conflict between the economic and social discourse contestation developed into a public schism that was not able to be minimized or remedied. The difficulty with using participative processes to normalize and legitimate a discourse transformation is that although conflict must be minimized, it is through accommodation of conflict and engagement with contested discourses that consensus or moral compromises may be established and new solutions emerge. Efforts to minimize uncertain outcomes can, instead, be interpreted as simply a new and more subtle form of domination as expectations of particular outcomes are negated

by a closed set of discursive options. Participative public relations, in which stakeholders are discursively engaged with pre-determined solutions and conflict suppressed or ignored, may, in fact, simply be a means of masking power relations rather than genuine engagement.

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