A Discursive Perspective from New Zealand: Another World View

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ABSTRACT: In this article we employ Fairclough's model of critical discourse analysis to explore the roles that public relations practitioners play in discursive struggles. We also draw on Moffitt's work on articulation and overdetermination to analyze the discursive practices employed by public relations practitioners in the research, redesign and training phases of discourse transformation.

At the societal level, discourse transformations emerge out of the discursive struggles engaged in by competing institutions and groups over sociocultural practices. The instances of discursive struggle over sociocultural practices which are analyzed in this article are drawn from the environmental, labor relations and education policy areas in New Zealand and Western Australia.

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INTRODUCTION

Critical discourse analysis has become an increasingly prominent theoretical perspective in social science research. Public relations scholars have, however, only recently begun to mine this perspective for the
insights it can offer public relations practice. This article will employ Fairclough’s model of critical discourse analysis to explore the roles that public relations practitioners play in discursive struggles. It will also draw on Moffitt’s work on articulation and overdetermination to analyze the discursive practices employed by public relations practitioners in the research, redesign and training phases of discourse transformation. At the societal level, discourse transformations emerge out of the discursive struggles engaged in by competing institutions and groups over sociocultural practices. This article will analyze instances of discursive struggle over sociocultural practices which are drawn from the environmental, labor relations and education policy areas.

PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

Grunig and White assert that, “[p]resuppositions about public relations begin with its role in society.” They mean that different social theories underpin different approaches to public relations, just as they underpin all areas of human social action. These social theories or ‘worldviews’ may not be explicitly stated, or even consciously formulated by practitioners, but they are nevertheless implicit in the strategies and products of public relations work. Grunig and White have identified six different worldviews that public relations practitioners hold in regard to the work they do. They range from the ‘pragmatic social role’ viewpoint which defines public relations as a technical function to the ‘critical social role’ viewpoint which critiques public relations from a systems perspective. The systems perspective holds that “systems are constructed; therefore they can be deconstructed and reconstructed.” Defining public relations work as ‘construction’ leads to an overlap between a critical systems perspective and that of critical discourse theorists such as Fairclough and Parker.

The worldviews identified by Grunig and White correspond with approaches that scholars could adopt in analyzing and theorising public relations practice. This article, however, identifies discourse-centred social theory as another worldview which could guide both public relations practice and scholarship. It draws heavily on the work of Fairclough and Moffitt who are, respectively, heavily influenced by Foucault and Hall. Viewed from a discourse-centered perspective, public relations practitioners can be seen to strategically deploy texts in discursive struggles over sociocultural practices. The aim of such discursive struggles is to maintain or to transform these sociocultural practices and the values and attitudes which support them and which they embody. Public relations practitioners are thus viewed as discourse technologists who play a central role in the maintenance and transformation of discourse.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF DISCOURSE

According to Fairclough:
Discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning.\textsuperscript{14}

In Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, discourse consists of texts, discursive practices and sociocultural practices. Drawing on Halliday,\textsuperscript{15} Fairclough defines texts as the spoken or written artifacts of discursive practices. Books, speeches, interview transcripts and policy documents are all texts. Discursive practices are concerned with the production, distribution and consumption of texts.\textsuperscript{16} For example, the organizational routines that produce media releases constitute discursive practices. Sociocultural practices are rooted in particular institutional structures and are legitimated by the attitudes and values of discourse participants. They are also the embodiment of these attitudes and values. For example, a belief in the virtues of representative democracy provides legitimacy for the sociocultural practice of democratic elections while the elections themselves embody democratic values. Discourse transformation can be said to have occurred if, as a result of discursive struggle, discourse participants come not only to act differently but also to understand or ‘know’ the world differently. Both the sociocultural practice and the attitudes and values which support it, have been transformed.

Public relations practitioners are involved in the maintenance and transformation of discourse primarily through the production and distribution of texts. They participate in discursive struggles by shaping texts and by strategically deploying texts which facilitate certain sociocultural practices and not others. As Fairclough states, discursive struggles are central to:

\begin{quote}
\begin{itemize}
  \item attempts by dominant social forces to direct and control the course of the major social and cultural changes which are affecting contemporary societies.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

One of the major discursive practices which has been employed in struggles over sociocultural practices has been discourse colonization. Discourse colonization occurs when the discourse of one domain is applied to another in an attempt to change the construction of meaning within the colonized discourse. For example, the discursive practices of the dominant economic sphere have been strategically deployed in other discursive spheres and have colonized them. Thus the language of market philosophy has been used to rename things and people as new kinds of discursive constructs. Education has become a service, pupils have become products, human beings and the environment have become resources to be conserved or exploited. This process of discourse colonization will be explored in the context of instances of discursive struggle.

Central components of discourse colonization are the processes of articulation and overdetermination. These processes have been explored by Moffitt\textsuperscript{18} in terms of the way in which a corporate image is formed in a particular public. Moffitt defines articulation as the way in which meaning or image:

\begin{quote}
[I]s determined by the intersection, or articulation, of multiple factors: the receiver’s personal experiences of gender, work, family, race, economic class;
\end{quote}
Public relations messages or texts are, therefore, only one factor in the image formation process. In attempting to ensure that a particular image is held by an individual, public relations practitioners must articulate this image with a pre-existing attitude or experience which predisposes the individual to accept that image. Individuals may hold multiple and conflicting images of an organization or policy but, at any point in time, only one position and one image can be in ascendency. The process whereby one image comes to dominate over other images—if only momentarily—is called overdetermination. Overdetermination occurs when a discourse articulation effects a meaning change.

Moffitt contends that the process of achieving overdetermination so that a meaning change is effected is continuous. Meaning is not permanently established. In her study of the images individuals held of a company, Moffitt demonstrated that:

[An] individual can slide in and out of many publics and shift among many held images of an organization, almost momentarily.

The implications of this finding for public relations work are immense. As Moffitt asserts, the notion that multiple and changing images may be held by a single individual is not generally accepted in public relations theory. Critical discourse theory would explain this phenomenon in terms of multiple discursive positionings. Fairclough, drawing on Foucault, suggests that individuals are, in part, constituted as subjects in and through discourse and thus that individuals occupy multiple subject positions within the multiple discourses in which they participate.

Public relations practitioners attempt to gain acceptance of particular organizational images or particular policy proposals by achieving an articulation between these images and proposals and particular subject positions occupied by members of key publics. For example, a government seeking to gain support for cuts in social services may address its message to citizens in their role as taxpayers rather than as consumers of these social services. If the taxpayer discourse overdetermines the consumer discourse then articulation has been achieved. In terms of discourse colonization, articulation may create links between discursive positions which may previously have existed in isolation from, or even in conflict with, one another. Thus, for example, the language of the market might be articulated to existing attitudes towards education so that the rules of the market come to overdetermine traditional ways of valuing education. The traditional values might be debated or simply rendered irrelevant by the discourse of the market which privileges cost efficiency and fiscal accountability over learning. The purpose of this discursive practice would be to change the sociocultural practices of the educational sphere and, thus, effect discourse transformation.
DISCURSIVE STRUGGLE

Fairclough uses the term 'professional technologists' to describe the role that public relations practitioners and others play in discursive struggles. He states:

Technologization of discourse involves the combination of (1) research into the discursive practices of social institutions and organizations, (2) redesign of those practices in accordance with particular strategies and objectives, usually those of managers or bureaucrats, and (3) training of institutional personnel in these redesigned practices.26

Public relations practitioners, as discourse technologists, are actively involved in the research, redesign and training dimensions of discursive struggles to maintain or transform sociocultural practices. They act on behalf of the governments, corporations and social movements whose interests are embodied in or opposed to, existing discourses. In this work, public relations practitioners co-operate with a variety of other occupational groups who also function as professional discourse technologists. Drawing upon Fairclough's model of discourse technologization, the article will now examine instances of discursive struggle in terms of the three dimensions of research, redesign and training. The discursive practices employed by public relations practitioners will be illustrated using examples from the environment, labor relations and education policy areas.

RESEARCH

Research into public attitudes and opinions constitutes the raw material used by public relations practitioners during discursive struggles. According to Grunig and Hunt, research can be used to support both symmetrical and asymmetrical approaches to public relations.27 In its asymmetrical context, the primary purpose of research is to identify "what the public will accept and tolerate."28 The results are, in a sense, used as a weapon against those whose attitudes and opinions are extracted during the research process. In its symmetrical context, research can be "used to counsel management on public reaction to policies and on how those policies could be changed to better serve the public interest."29 A symmetrical approach would imply a negotiated approach to discourse transformations in which all subjects participated. The outcome of the process would not be set in advance, as a series of objectives, but would emerge during the process. The instances of discursive struggle cited in this article, while in no way conclusive, demonstrate an asymmetrical approach to research and to the processes of redesign and training. The use that has been made of the discursive practices of consultation during the research phase of discursive struggles will now be analyzed.
Consultation, generally conceived of as a symmetrical process\textsuperscript{30} concerned with taking account of the views of multiple publics, has become a research mechanism, a redesign resource, and a training environment. In terms of its research function, consultation involves drawing publics into what is framed as a dialogue with regulatory bodies through which views are extracted and energies are consumed in a lengthy process of report writing and meeting attendance. Consultation has been used by governments intent on policy reform and by business seeking public consent for projects such as new mining developments. Consultation processes constitute an ideal mechanism for gathering rich insights into the values and beliefs held by these key publics in a symmetrical or an asymmetrical way. The discursive practices of the discourse technologists who design and manage the consultation process largely determine the character of the process.

In New Zealand, the passing of the Resource Management Act (1991) led to a marked increase in the number of consultation processes which regional governments, charged with the oversight of natural resources, were required to undertake. Regional councils were ill-prepared to undertake this process as few had well-resourced public relations departments. One of the authors was employed in 1991 to undertake a training program with regional council staff in 'public relations.' The brief for the training sessions was to teach the basic theory and practice of public relations work to staff who would be engaged in consultation processes. The first training session was, however, undermined by a participant who stated that consultation was "not a communication practice, it was a technical requirement under the law." Participants then insisted that the trainer's role was not to help them to develop an understanding of symmetrical communication but to enable them to fulfill their legal duties. Consultation was to be used to create the illusion of symmetrical communication and the trainer was to provide the techniques for the creation of this illusion. One of the results of adopting this approach to consultation has been a growing cynicism on the part of those consulted. For example, in New Zealand, the growing recognition of the rights of the indigenous Maori people has led to an explosion in the number of consultative processes Maori are asked to participate in. As a result of both the frequency of consultations and of the perception that being consulted does not necessarily equate with being listened to, some Maori tribes or iwi, now insist that they are paid for the time spent as "research consultants."\textsuperscript{31} Thus Maori have attempted to reposition themselves as valued experts within the research phase of discourse transformation.

The New Zealand Department of Conservation (DOC), also employed consultation as a research mechanism. DOC was required by the government to develop a ten-year conservation management strategy.\textsuperscript{32} As part of the research phase to develop this strategy, DOC undertook a consultation process which was used to determine how to undertake consultation. This initial round of consultation, which was conducted in the east coast region of New Zealand, served two purposes. The first was to inform people about the nature of DOC and their work. The second was to research the existing attitudes and opinions of those consulted toward DOC issues. The data collected from this first round of consultation was used to design the second round. The data was analyzed to determine
both how to communicate and what to communicate. The resulting template was applied to all 14 New Zealand conservancies or DOC regions. At one level, the DOC consultation process appears to be symmetrical. Publics were consulted and their views were taken into account when designing further consultation processes. However, viewed from a different perspective, the process appears anything but symmetrical. The objectives for the second round of consultations were set in advance rather than negotiated with those consulted. DOC then carefully stage managed the communication process to ensure that the DOC agenda was met during each consultative meeting. The research data was used to develop discursive strategies which positioned DOC as a certain kind of knowledge object and which encouraged certain kinds of public submissions. DOC were thus attempting to manage the outcome of the discursive struggle over the future direction of New Zealand's environmental policy. Public relations practitioners were the discourse technologists who designed and implemented the discursive practices employed by DOC during the research phase.

REDESIGN

Public relations campaigns are often used to facilitate the achievement of sociocultural objectives through the transformation of discourse. The Western Australian Building Management Authority's (BMA) 'No Ticket, No Start, No More' campaign clearly illustrates the central role that public relations practitioners play in such discursive struggles. This campaign was an entrant in the Public Relations Institute of Australia's annual Golden Target Award competition. The campaign launched a new 'Code Of Practice' for the construction industry in Western Australia. This industry had a long history of compulsory union membership. It also had some firmly entrenched safety policies which, for example, allowed workers to leave sites when the temperature in the shade reached 100 degrees. Thus, the public relations campaign had the difficult task of attempting to gain support amongst workers for a policy which clearly undermined the existing working conditions many of them enjoyed. It also had to convince employers to end any special deals they had negotiated with trade unions. The campaign employed both persuasive and threatening tactics towards these two key publics.

The 'No ticket, No Start, No More' campaign set out to overdetermine the existing discourse of workers' 'rights' with the market discourse of 'quality' and 'efficiency.' The goal was to position concerns for industry 'profitability' ahead of concerns for the pay and conditions of workers in order to gain consent for sociocultural change. In order to achieve this consent, the market discourse had to be articulated with the attitudes and values of construction workers. The public relations practitioners employed by the BMA stated in their SWOT analysis that "workers may fear job loss and change." These job loss fears were key to the campaign's attempt to overdetermine the strongly entrenched discourse of worker rights.
The objectives of the Code of Practices which the campaign promoted were:

To encourage the prevention of disputes.

To set responsibilities for all people in the industry.

To establish, improve and promote good work practices.  

The first objective presented a bid to reduce trade union power in the building industry in terms of increasing industrial harmony. The campaign attempted to colonize, and thus overdetermine, the existing discourse on industrial disputes which emphasised the worker's 'right to strike' with one which emphasised the negative impact that strikes had on the industry and on jobs.

One of the first texts produced by the campaign was a newsletter to all construction workers which stated:

Some overseas investors are scared of losing money through strikes, disputes and inefficient operations. Western Australia must get business from investors to provide jobs for the future, so changes must be made.

The business imperative of attracting investors was thus presented as paramount to job security. That construction workers were being asked to adopt a new perspective on strikes was made even clearer in the 'question and answer' section of the newsletter which related to payments to striking workers:

"The Code says that an employer who pays workers who are on strike risks losing the chance to work on Government projects. That could affect your future employment."

The interests of employers were here equated with the interests of construction workers in a message which was directed to both publics. While employers were reminded of the consequences of breaking the Code, workers were asked to see the withholding of pay during strikes as a practice which protected their jobs. The discursive strategy was to move construction workers from the collective subject position of workers with rights to protect to the subject position of individuals who were potentially unemployed. This discursive strategy was clearly intended to weaken the ability of construction workers to resist the policy change.

The equation of the interests of employees and workers was central to the campaign. This discursive practice completely excluded trade unions. It sought to replace the traditionally adversarial relationship between employers and workers in which trade unions had a central role, as the workers' representatives, with a symbiotic relationship in which trade unions had no role at all. Although voluntary unionism was only one part of the Code it was the aspect most emphasised by the campaign. Indeed the campaign's central slogan 'No ticket, No Start, No More' referred to the end of compulsory union membership on construction sites. In her Golden Target Award executive summary, the BMA's public rela-
tions practitioner stated that the campaign “had to be released prior to union ticket “show days” on construction sites.” Trade unions were thus clearly identified as competitors in the discursive struggle.

The campaign’s second objective which emphasised the ‘responsibilities’, as opposed to ‘rights’, of ‘all people in the industry’ was a clear expression of the symbiotic relationship which the campaign attempted to foster. For example, the Minister’s newsletter stated:

Everyone is responsible for safety. You should work safely and within the law whether you are the worker or the boss.

The Code aims to improve efficiency and productivity by the elimination of restrictive work practices. This will benefit everyone in the industry.

Workers were, then, asked to take joint responsibility for everything from the safety of their work sites to the overall efficiency and productivity of the industry.

The campaign’s third objective relating to work practices involved the difficult task of positioning a cut back in working conditions as a positive development. Such a portrayal was, however, relatively easy to achieve within a discourse which equated workers’ interests with industry profitability. For example, a campaign newsletter to construction workers employed on BMA sites, stated:

You may not know, but over the years practices have been put in place which exceed the award provisions and, in some cases do not always benefit customers. Such practices will now cease and the BMA will ensure that the proper award entitlements will be provided to its employees.

This statement is interesting for two reasons. The first is that workers are being asked to put the interests of industry customers ahead of their own interests. Once again the market discourse is employed to overdetermine the traditional discourse emphasising workers’ rights. The second is that the arguments for doing so are here couched in legal terms. Employees are promised the “proper” and, therefore, legal working conditions. Any additional deals which workers have negotiated on top of the award are by implication both improper and illegal.

The notion that existing work practices might be illegal was a common theme during the campaign. In a radio interview conducted at the start of the campaign, the Minister for labor Relations Graham Kierath, stated that there was a need to enforce the Code because, “we’ve found both here in Western Australia and around in other States that often the things that are occurring are actually in breach of existing laws.” This vaguely worded claim regarding the illegality of some work practices was used to undermine the construction workers’ belief in their right to maintain existing working conditions. The market discourse was thus reinforced by the legal discourse. This labor relations example has illustrated the discursive practices employed by public relations practitioners to achieve discourse transformation by colonization.
TRAINING

Redesigned discourses, no matter how skilful the design process or how sophisticated the research work they draw upon, inevitably encounter resistance at the point of implementation. Old ways of talking persist which undermine new social practices by serving as reminders of the past and of alternative ways of thinking about the world. Training is thus required to ensure that new meanings are distributed and that discourse participants 'speak' the new language. Changing the way in which workers and employers talked about work practices and union involvement on job sites was, for example, a central concern of the 'No ticket, No Start, No More' campaign. The first campaign newsletter sent to construction workers by the BMA stated that, "One of the aims of the Task Force is to help people to change from the old ways of doing things." In order to achieve these changes, face-to-face training sessions were conducted by the BMA for contractors, site managers and construction managers. Construction workers were provided with newsletters and leaflets.

An example of the use of public relations texts as part of the training process can be found in the BMA's campaign to change the way in which construction workers and employers conceptualized hot weather and its impact on work safety. In Western Australian it was customary for workers to be allowed to leave construction sites when the temperature in the shade reached 100 degrees. A BMA article entitled 'Hot But Safe,' however, attempted to undermine this practice by articulating new ways of looking at heat stress with existing attitudes and opinions about heat stress. Workers were told that air temperature was a 'single risk factor' which should not be used to judge their chances of suffering heat stress. Instead, construction workers were told to take responsibility to ensure that heat stress did not occur by, for example, working in the shade where possible and wearing light coloured clothing. More mysteriously a briefing note for site managers stated that the ability to work in hot conditions depended on one's degree of 'acclimatisation' and that only those who were 'poorly acclimatised' suffered from the heat. Heat stress was thus transformed from a collective problem caused by seasonal climatic changes into an individual problem or weakness. Training for workers and site managers was presented as the key to overcoming this problem. Once again, the text attempted to overdetermine the worker rights discourse, in which construction workers could act as a unified group, with a market discourse in which they were positioned as individuals.

Consultation processes have been discussed above in terms of their contribution to the research and redesign phases of discursive struggles. Consultation has, however, also been used to provide a training environment for discourse participants. For example, when the New Zealand Ministry of Education sought, in 1993, to devolve its property management responsibilities to state schools it engaged in two rounds of consultation with affected schools. The first round of consultations were part of a research process which culminated in the 'Titter Report.' The second round of consultations saw the taskforce visiting schools to gain 'feedback' about the report. The report, which contained four options for
schools, was presented as part of the negotiation process between government and schools. The language used to describe each of the four options revealed, however, a different agenda. The report described the options in the following way:

Option A “would not resolve main concerns;”
Option B “risks outweigh benefits;”
Option C “not regarded as a practical national system;” and
Option D “offers alternatives . . . provides for diversity.”

It was claimed that the report provided a basis for discussing the four alternatives, but in practice it provided support for only one option while systematically undermining the other three.

That training was the primary function of the second round of consultation was apparent in the opening remarks which taskforce members made to consultative meetings. They explained to the assembled public that, “We are here to explain. We are not here to debate what will happen.” McGregor argues that the meetings were less of a forum for informed debate than they were an opportunity for taskforce members to clarify and explain the content of the report and to justify the preferred policy option. The consultation process prepared the way for policy change. It constituted the final phase of the discursive struggle over the sociocultural practices related to one area of education policy.

Two years later, another New Zealand Ministry of Education consultation team was open about the training aspects of the consultation process. A Ministry representative informed a School Board of Trustees who were being consulted that they had no choice but to use the words preferred by the Ministry when they spoke to him. He stated that, “you are just going to have to get used to this kind of terminology.” He described his role in the consultation process as being to teach them to frame their submissions within the terms of market economics or, what he termed, “the government’s philosophic approach to economics which is the basis to all current policy.” The representative encouraged Board members to refer to school children as “products” and to education as a “service.” He stated, “I know that it’s tough, that it sounds harsh, but that’s the way it is.” Training of key discourse participants, in this case, a School Board, was again the final stage of the discursive struggle.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Public relations practitioners in their role as discourse technologists are, therefore, involved in struggles to change sociocultural practices and, thus, to transform discourse. Fairclough’s model identified three phases of the discourse technologist’s work: research, redesign, and training. This article has demonstrated that public relations practitioners participate in all three
phases. The article has also shown that public relations practitioners employ the discursive practices of articulation and overdetermination during discursive struggles. In the examples cited, these practices were strategically employed in an asymmetrical way which privileged the interests of the practitioners' employers over the interests of other discourse participants.

These findings have at least two major implications. The first is for public relations education and the second is for public relations practice. Generally, public relations textbooks do not provide students with the conceptual framework needed to understand the complex discursive struggles in which they will be involved. The broader discursive context within which all public relations campaigns and programs must operate is not explored or, in most cases, even acknowledged. Students need to understand concepts like 'articulation' and 'overdetermination' in order to construct, deconstruct or reconstruct discourse in their future work as discourse technologists.50

The second major implication concerns the ethical dimension of discourse transformation. The discursive struggles in which public relations practitioners participate encompass the issues at the heart of sociocultural change. In terms of their role as discourse technologists, public relations practitioners, then have a clear responsibility to consider their work in terms of outcomes as well as of efficiency.51 Public relations campaigns have assisted the overdetermination of sociocultural discourses by the discourse of the market. It may now be time for public relations practitioners and scholars to work together within their professional organizations to consider the ethical implications of their role in discursive struggles.

NOTES

5. Ibid, pp. 31-64.
8. Ian Parker, op. cit.
10. Mary Anne Moffitt, op. cit.
29. Ibid, p. 25.
30. Ibid.
31. Mark Baker, New Zealand public relations consultant, personal correspondence, (December, 1995).
32. DOC public relations practitioner, personal correspondence, (December, 1995).
35. Ibid, p. 4.
36. Ibid, p. 4.
42. BMA, , op cit. (1993a), p. 5
43. Ibid, p. 5.
50. James E. Grunig and Jon White, op. cit.
51. James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, op. cit.