Public Interest Communication

Communication has become the technology of public interest, demanding a re-examination of the key concept of public in both public relations and communication theory. This book defines a new concept of public interest communication, combining the conflict, negotiation and adaptation inherent in public interest, with a critical approach to communication management and public relations.

Combining conceptual discussions about interest-forming practices and the fundamental role played by communication in constructing the public interest, the book uses case studies and theoretical modelling to explore the tensions and negotiation of conflicting interests. Public interest communication is identified within systems of governance at local, national and international levels, and across social and cultural contexts – such as health, community, media and the environment – each finding interest conflicts within the changing global environment.

Addressing the forces of fragmentation, inequality and individualisation that characterise the modern world, this thought-provoking volume will be of great interest to researchers and advanced students of communication, public relations, environmental communication, public communication, and public policy.

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Routledge New Directions in Public Relations and Communications Research
Edited by Kevin Moloney

Current academic thinking about public relations (PR) and related communication is a lively, expanding marketplace of ideas and many scholars believe that it’s time for its radical approach to be deepened. Routledge New Directions in PR & Communication Research is the forum of choice for this new thinking. Its key strength is its remit, publishing critical and challenging responses to continuities and fractures in contemporary PR thinking and practice, tracking its spread into new geographies and political economies. It questions its contested role in market-orientated, capitalist, liberal democracies around the world, and examines its invasion of all media spaces, old, new, and as yet unenvisaged. We actively invite new contributions and offer academics a welcoming place for the publication of their analyses of a universal, persuasive mind-set that lives comfortably in old and new media around the world.

Books in this series will be of interest to academics and researchers involved in these expanding fields of study, as well as students undertaking advanced studies in this area.

Public Interest Communication
Critical Debates and Global Contexts
Jane Johnston and Magda Pieczka

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The Challenge of Authenticity
Amy Thurlow

Public Interest Communication
Critical Debates and Global Contexts

Edited by
Jane Johnston and Magda Pieczka
# Contents

*List of tables* vii  
*List of contributors* viii  
*Acknowledgements* xi  

Public Interest Communication: Critical Debates and Global Contexts: An introduction 1  
JANE JOHNSTON AND MAGDA PIECZKA  

## PART I  
**Critical debates** 7  

1 Public interest communication: A framework for systematic inquiry 9  
JANE JOHNSTON AND MAGDA PIECZKA  

2 Terministic dialectics of individual and community agency: Co-creating and co-enacting public interest 32  
ROBERT L. HEATH AND DAMION WAYMER  

3 Communicating public engagement, public interest and participation: Culturally centring community voices 52  
MOHAN J. DUTTA  

4 Climate change and the public interest: Science, legitimacy and diversity 72  
MHAIRI AITKEN  

5 Commercial media platforms and the challenges to public expression and scrutiny 92  
NICHOLAS CARAH
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Articulating national identity in postcolonial democracies: Defining relations and interests through competing publics</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T. KENN GAITHER AND PATRICIA A. CURTIN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>In whose interests?: Media, political communication and First Nations Australians</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JANE JOHNSTON, SUSAN FORDE AND BONI ROBERTSON</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Understanding the public interest puzzle in China’s public relations: The role of balance and counterbalance based on Confucian Great Harmony</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JENNY ZHENGYE HOU</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Security, democratic legitimacy and the public interest: Policing and the communicative ritual in deeply divided societies</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IAN SOMERVILLE AND SCOTT DAVIDSON</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Lobbying for life: Violence against the press and the public interest</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>JULIETA A. BRAMBILA AND JAIRO LUGO-OCANDO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Index                                                                 | 210         |
Tables

9.1 List of abbreviations of bodies and organisations in Northern Ireland 179
Contributors

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We would like to acknowledge the editor of this book series, Kevin Moloney, who supported our approach to publish this book, recognising that the public interest provided an untapped field of potential for theoretical exploration by communication and public relations scholars. Together with Taylor & Francis editor Jacqueline Curthoys, Moloney encouraged this book from day one. In addition, we thank the anonymous reviewers who provided excellent feedback on the book proposal. We are very grateful for each of their contributions to the process, and think the book is stronger for their scrutiny and ideas. Finally, the book would not have occurred without the magnificent and tireless efforts of the chapter authors. Like the publishers, the stellar line-up of contributors showed great enthusiasm for the project from the start; a keenness to be part of the first published collection of public interest communication. Each brought rich and varied expertise to truly take this book into new territory.

Jane Johnston & Magda Pieczka
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Public Interest Communication: Critical Debates and Global Contexts

An introduction

Jane Johnston and Magda Pieczka

When we embarked on this book, public interest communication was largely an uncharted territory. Our intention was to create a book that simultaneously expanded and challenged current theory in the fields of communication, public relations and the public interest. It needed to be open to critical and pragmatic perspectives, subaltern, alternative and mainstream communication, and media theory, and consider public/s and publicness from various cultural, socio-political, national and empirical viewpoints, while also incorporating an understanding of the complex and contested notions of public interest. The book needed to go beyond simplistic notions that the public interest was automatically antithetical to private interests and that it was necessarily aligned with equally mutable ideas of common good or community. Part of this process was to move beyond the dominant, largely Western democratic understanding of the public interest which has been widely examined (see, for example, Bozeman 2007; Douglass 1980; Flathman 1966; Goodin 2008; Goodin & Dryzek 2008; Johnston 2016), and explore how interest is contested in different socio-political environments. Crucially, it also needed to focus on an obvious gap in existing public interest literature and research – that is, the role played by communication in creating and serving shared public interests and interest conflicts. Theories of public interest acknowledge the role of communication but focus on the politics of interest; communication theory, instead, focuses on the question of the communicative existence of the public. In bringing these two together, and creating a space to examine these from multiple perspectives, Public Interest Communication: Critical Debates and Global Contexts was therefore positioned to take public interest and communication into new territory. Our argument for public interest communication was therefore based on the idea that the ontology of the public interest is communicative; that is, it comes into existence through acts of communication that allow for ideas to circulate, to be used, to be argued about and challenged, and finally, to be incorporated into social and political structures, such as regulation, legislation and codes of practice that give shape to human worlds but which are often contested.

A challenge of this book was to call to account expert communication practices that routinely work at the sharp edge of interest politics, and to
support the scholars who are positioned to challenge the status quo in developing theory and interrogating practice environments. With this in mind, we approached the authors in this book to bring their expertise to contexts in which the public interest appears problematic, in which various appeals and challenges exist, where cooperation and settlement may or may not be achieved, and to examine ways in which undertakings are made possible by different communication forms and strategies. As such, the chapters – each written from a different critical, global, social or political perspective – interrogate interest conflicts and synergies and communication processes surrounding. The result is a rich and diverse collection of chapters that traverse topics such as climate change, media security, journalistic freedom, Indigenous and minority representation, located across North America, China, Europe, Australia and Africa. In ten chapters Public Interest Communication: Critical Debates and Global Contexts covers extensive ground as, through empirical investigation and theoretical critique, these leading scholars explore the idea of public interest communication through critical lenses. Each applies public interest communication to their own field of expertise, pushing the boundaries of this book into fascinating and new spaces of communication inquiry.

The book is divided into two parts: Part I interrogates theoretical intersections and conflicts, focusing on public interest issues in social, cultural and political contexts; Part II interrogates global perspectives of public interest and interest-conflicts, focusing on case studies within single or multiple nation-states.

Chapter run down

In Chapter 1, we provide a foundation for the book and a broad theoretical context for public interest communication. The chapter explores the widely interrogated field of the public interest as a largely political construct and continues in this line of inquiry to consider the ways in which communication and the public interest intersect. We introduce themes associated with process vs. outcome; the inquiry-driven dialectic; and questions of context, place and time as central considerations for public interest communication and inquiry. Our chapter examines why the public interest is so often understood as a paradox, drawing on the insightful works of John Dewey and Walter Lippmann; public sphere and communication intersections introduced by Habermas and critical theory; Castells’s networked society and the public interest; and the work of public interest scholars from across a range of disciplines. The chapter is intended as a stand-alone public interest communication foundation which also sets up a framework that guides the rest of the book.

In Chapter 2 Robert Heath and Damion Waymer advance the theme that public interest is a contextualised and situated view of the benefits of collective choice and action. The chapter draws on Burke’s sociological theory of language including his notion of terministic screens to explain how humans
interpret their physical and social realms through terminological filters. The authors consider how discourse processes and outcomes lead to dominant (ultimate) terminologies that blend individual interests into shared (public) interests. Heath and Waymer examine discourse arenas – described as layered networks of interlocking relationships, interests and dialectically voiced viewpoints – which shape public understanding of the public interest. Focusing on the climate change debate, they examine how discourse is developed by corporate interests, for example by ExxonMobil, and how this affects the discourse arena in shaping corporate interests as public interests.

In Chapter 3 Mohan Dutta critically examines the ways in which strategic tools of engagement and participation are co-opted into the agendas of dominant structures. He examines how the language of public interest is deployed by public relations in serving the status quo, consolidating power in the hands of elite actors in global networks. He argues how, for instance, narratives of development and public good are used within efforts of community relations and corporate social responsibility to strategically achieve goals of organisational effectiveness. The chapter examines key issues surrounding the role of the private sector in redefining public interest through the framework of public-private partnerships and other strategies where voices of subaltern communities and their public interests are erased from the discursive space. Drawing upon a culture-centred approach to communication, he proposes the role of listening as an entry point for creating infrastructures of communication serving public interest.

In Chapter 4 Mhairi Aitken examines the public interest in the context of climate change communication, exploring the potential for deontic or dialogical approaches to the public interest and their implications for climate change-related planning and policy development. This chapter considers how invoking the public interest can conceal the range of interests and particular socio-political imaginaries, shaping and restricting how climate change is framed, focusing in particular on renewable energy. Aitken examines how communication problems are not about discovering ‘scientific facts’ or universal truths but rather of understanding and managing complex realities. She draws on Habermas’s ideas of communicative action, proposing that dialogical approaches to the public interest, by focusing on processes rather than outcomes, emphasise the need for meaningful and open public engagement in decision-making processes, ensuring procedural and recognitional justice.

In Chapter 5 Nicholas Carah examines global media companies and their role in the public culture of capitalist liberal democratic societies. This chapter explores how media and communication platforms, notably Facebook and Google, represent engineering networks of production that illustrate an epochnal shift in commercial media. Carah draws on a growing body of critical media theory (e.g. Andrejevic, Dahlberg, Smythe & Dinh, van Dijck) in challenging what it means for the public interest when media institutions do not produce content, but instead engineer data-processing infrastructures that
draw from the continuous flow of public media activity to monitor and shape public life. He provides deep insights into how this ongoing interplay between human communicative capacities and the technical design and decision making of media platforms challenge many assumptions of the role of dominant media platforms in public interest communication.

In Chapter 6 T. Kenn Gaither and Patricia Curtin use critical/cultural and postcolonial theories to explicate the relationship between the public interest and communication practices by the state in emerging democracies, specifically in Ghana and Mozambique. They challenge notions of ‘one-ness’ or ‘common Africanism’, instead proposing the idea of publics over a more static notion of a public, and view of colonialism as a constitutive force that elevates some publics and abrogates others. The chapter draws on articulation theory as described by Barker, Hall and Laclau, which sees imagined communities connecting through the process of creating meaning around an identity, whether national, tribal or continental. Central to articulation theory are these relationships and the processes in which relationships form and are contextually articulated or broken apart through disarticulation. Gaither and Curtin argue that the public interest in these developing countries (and others) must be carefully scrutinised to examine how it is articulated and by whom.

In Chapter 7 Jane Johnston, Susan Forde and Boni Robertson examine public interest communication in Australia as it relates to government and media discourse, First Nations Australians and institutionalised understandings of what is in the public interest. The authors challenge how the public interest of Australia’s Indigenous peoples is determined by and serves the expectations of decision makers – often white Australians – and the political interests of politicians, rather than those who are most affected. They argue that scant attention has been paid to the public interest as it relates to specific socio-political issues such as Australian Indigenous issues, especially from the voice of First Nations peoples. This chapter draws on two streams of theory – critical whiteness theory and mediatisation – to illustrate how white social constructs within settler societies such as Australia become the dominant discourse and how these feed into the political and media logics of news production.

In Chapter 8 Jenny Hou examines public interest communication in China, drawing on the Confucian concept of Great Harmony. Hou argues that China is distinguished from the West mainly in its authoritarianism, underpinned by Great Harmony thinking (datong sixiang), and the idea of obeying the hierarchy and authority to maintain political stability and social cohesion. The chapter reports the findings of Hou’s empirical study of China’s public relations industry in which she asks: How does China’s public relations as an industry interpret, articulate, or contest the public interest in practice as it interplays with the overarching Great Harmony context? Hou’s interviews with 46 practitioners provide deep insights and rich illustrations of harmony as a means of balance, counterbalance, and what is described as dynamic
equilibrium. The chapter compares the Western focus on the tension between public and private interests, and the dominance of the Party-state as the major rival to, judge of and influencer of the public interest substance and process in China.

In Chapter 9 Ian Somerville and Scott Davidson examine how public interest communication is conceptualised and contested in divided communities. Two case studies are used to investigate and analyse the role of police public relations: the ethno-religious divisions in Northern Ireland; and the racially divided context of Ferguson, Missouri, United States. Their chapter interrogates the meta-discursive framing that surrounds the idea of human problems being caused by poor communication, with models for democratic peace building and conflict resolution (deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism) explored in relation to how the public interest may be understood in divided societies. Somerville and Davidson point to the need to recognise that it is often lack of trust, disappointment or dissensus that prompts participation and engagement within divided communities. The chapter suggests that communication in these contexts cannot rely on consensus or top-down approaches, urging neighbourhood-level communication and a willingness by institutional communicators to cede control of the dialogue and not fear the enactment of passionate disagreement.

In Chapter 10 Julieta Brambila and Jairo Lugo-Ocando investigate the relationship between civic networking coalitions and public interest communication by examining lobbying and campaigning in Mexico. The chapter explores two civic networking coalitions which were established in order to resist and denounce anti-press violence in two time frames: 2006 and 2010. The authors examine the idea of public interest-forming practices, as outlined in Chapter 1, to see how these civic coalitions could positively impact on journalistic safety. They draw on Castells's ideas of the power within networked societies, and the social and media movements that can emerge, and raise awareness, bringing public support and influencing policy making. While they argue that these civic networking coalitions can have success, they also note how, against a background of corruption, violence and collusion, these public interest-forming practices alone are insufficient for effecting meaningful change.

In conclusion

These ten chapters, individually and collectively, make a highly original contribution to the growing critical scholarship in public relations and communication. Importantly, they also provide the first collection of critiques of public interest communication within the one volume, interrogating some of the biggest issues of contemporary society, providing insights across cultures, politics and continents.

We believe the book is inherently about dialectic, where thesis is met by antithesis, and continues to move forward. In this dynamic state, public
Interest communication is not a static concept, but rather is organic and contingent on factors such as process, context, social and cultural norms, and agency. This is a central theme throughout the book expressed both explicitly and implicitly along with other themes such as minority and subaltern communication, and bottom-up, localised communicative practice.

We hope you find the following chapters challenge you to rethink the connections between communication and private, corporate, national and public interests. If we accomplish this, the book has achieved its aim.

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