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Challenges to the notion of publics in public relations: implications of the risk society for the discipline

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Abstract

The notion risk society offers a conceptual framework for understanding the emergence of new communicatively powerful publics. Focusing on the role of the public for the firm, this paper argues that the emergence of the powerful consumer and the critical public is not coincidental but a symptom of the emergence of the risk society. In looking at the consequences of the risk society at the individual, the institutional, and social political levels, the paper argues that new forms of political discourse are emerging which change the “ground rules” of the interaction between the firm and its publics. Linking the growing interest in identity with risk communication, the paper sheds light on the nature of the arenas in which these public operate and the consequences for business. It is argued that the emerging sub-political arena of direct action and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has the capability of catapulting public relations into a central role in organisational sustainability. © 2002 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The firm faces unprecedented external threats to its legitimacy.¹ As a major source of turbulence, firms’ apparent loss of legitimacy² has been followed by the emergence of powerful publics: so-called political consumers³ and activists.⁴ These publics emerge around the perception of risk; personal risk and societal risk: be they environmental risks, health risks, risks of exploitation, etc. In many ways, for society in general and for firms in particular, the production (and consumption) of risks has become at least as important as the production and consumption of goods and services.⁵ Given public relations’ explicit role of reducing environmental risk and uncertainty for the firm, it is remarkable that the discipline has not incorporated ideas of risk

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communication and deeper sociological consequences of the emergence of the so-called risk society into its scholarship. Through a more critical and reflective approach to the definition of publics and the study of their dynamics, pulling from fields such as sociology, media studies, and marketing, this paper opens up an avenue of research which would aid both the theory and practice of public relations in coping with the complex and uncertain environment.

This paper presents the notion of risk society as a basis for building up a framework for reconceptualising our approach to publics. Current conceptualisations of publics within public relations remain remarkably simplistic and reflect the managerial and normative traditions prevalent in the discipline.⁶ Most notably they tend to impose a rational–managerial logic onto publics. This neglects to consider the internal dynamics of public assuming that they are composed of information processing individuals who react to organisationally defined issues, and fails to incorporate the idea that publics might emerge without organisational action. In this paper, it is noted that communities of publics form in a sub-political arena. These communities are built and sustained through issue-based discourses, which define their identity. The consequences of regarding publics as discourse arenas involved in the exchange of meaning and identity is discussed. The paper rounds off by arguing that a renewed focus on publics and away from organisations, incorporating the notions of risk, identity and discourse presented in this paper, would offer the public relations discipline the opportunity to offer a unique and sustained leadership role in the study of firms’ relationship with their environment.

2. Publics in risk society

This section looks at the emergence of the so-called risk society and its consequences for the role of the individual in society. It draws heavily from one of the main proponents of the theory of the risk society, the German sociologist Ulrich Beck.

A number of theories of society raise the issue of a new role for the individual. These come under the various themes of late-modernism,⁷ detraditional society⁸, postmodernism⁹ and reflexive modernisation.¹⁰ Beck¹¹ presents a society that is increasingly turning in on itself—not in a self-reflective, introvert way, but critically, questioning the very principles upon which society is founded. Modern society’s fundamental belief in technological progress and the benefits that it can give to mankind are now being overshadowed by the negative effects of that technology. Threats, or risks, to society are coming from the source of society’s wealth. Scientific and technological progress has produced the very industries that are now threatening our environment and our future survival, argues Beck. Unparalleled growth has produced a society that is reliant on the products of its own destruction. Not only that, but science is not producing any answers to many of our environmental problems. Indeed, Beck argues, there is an increasing perception that “science has become a protector of a global contamination of people and nature.”¹² Traditional institutions: government, business, science, etc. face a crisis in their legitimacy.¹³ The individual reassesses, and critically questions these institutions of society. In questioning these institutions, the individual accepts a greater personal responsibility for their life. Thus, whilst it was once the case that the individual would allow responsibility to lay externally, believing that elected bodies and formal organisations were both capable and legitimate carriers of authority, it is now the case that the individual feels impelled to take

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