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Putting Engagement in its PROper place: State of the field, definition and model of Engagement in Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

Although engagement has been a catchword in public relations practice and theory for over a decade, the term has been applied rather loosely to imply any form of communicative interaction between publics and organizations. Despite lack of clarity on the concept of engagement, research has been thriving, propelled by the increasing prevalence of social media and organizations' consequent rush to digitally engage publics. This paper assesses the use of engagement in the field of public relations and critiques the equation of engagement with communicative interaction, with its foregrounding *engagement as collaboration* over that of *engagement as control*. It also builds upon theoretical conceptualizations of public/stakeholder engagement, employee engagement, and digital engagement to propose a practice-relevant and theoretically informed model and definition of engagement: *Engagement is an affective, cognitive, and behavioral state wherein publics and organizations who share mutual interests in salient topics interact along continua that range from passive to active and from control to collaboration, and is aimed at goal attainment, adjustment, and adaptation for both publics and organizations.*

1. Introduction

Engagement has been a buzzword in public relations practice and theory for over a decade, its importance further fueled by [Edelman's \(2008\)](#) vision of public engagement as the future of public relations. Although the concept has its origins in practice, it has garnered scholarly attention with a special issue in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* in 2014, a call for papers from the 23rd International Public Relations Research Symposium, BledCom 2016, and a related special issue in *Public Relations Review*. Research on engagement in public relations has mushroomed, especially in the area of digital engagement ([Avidar, Ariel, Malka, & Levy, 2015](#); [Lovari & Parisi, 2015](#); [Men & Tsai, 2014, 2015](#)). However, there are few studies on employee engagement ([Gill, 2015](#); [Welch, 2011](#)) and even fewer on theoretical conceptualizations of public/stakeholder engagement ([Taylor & Kent, 2014](#); [Taylor, Vasquez & Doorley, 2003](#)).

There also has been little theoretical explication of the concept of engagement within public relations, except for rare attempts such as those by [Taylor and Kent \(2014\)](#), who situated engagement within the concept of ethical communication and dialogue, specifically within dialogue's dimension of *propinquity*. Despite a lack of clarity on the concept, research on engagement has been booming, driven by the rising popularity of social media and organizations' scramble to digitally engage organizational publics.

The field of public relations lacks a practice-relevant, theoretically informed model and definition of engagement that can inform practice and chart future directions of research. Accordingly, this paper reviews the literature on the concept of engagement within the field of public relations, identifies key points for consideration, proposes a model and definition for engagement, and suggests directions for future research.

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2. Literature review

Most of the seminal scholarly work on engagement has taken place in the fields of applied psychology, organizational behavior and human resource management (on employee/work engagement and burnout), education (on student engagement), political science (on political/civic engagement), and marketing/advertising (on customer engagement).

A thorough review of the literature on engagement within public relations and communication management revealed three main clusters of work: **(1) Digital engagement** (Avidar et al., 2015; Bowen, 2013; DiStato, 2012; Jiang, Luo & Kulemeka, 2016; Men & Tsai, 2013, 2014, 2015; Wigley & Lewis, 2012; Yang & Kang, 2009), including civic engagement (Agostino, 2013; Comor & Bean, 2012; Housholder & LaMarre, 2015; Lovari & Parisi, 2015), engagement by non-profit organizations (Cho, Schweickart, & Haase, 2014; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Porter, Anderson, & Nhotsavang, 2015; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), and engagement during crises (Ott & Theunissen, 2015); **(2) Employee engagement** (Gill, 2015; Karanges, Johnston, Beatson & Lings, 2015; Men, 2012; Welch, 2011); and **(3) Public/Stakeholder engagement** (Gregory, 2004; Kang, 2014; Johnston, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2015; Luoma-aho, 2015; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Taylor et al., 2003; Willis, 2015).

The following section reviews this body of work, interrogates the literature, and raises pertinent points for consideration from the perspectives of publics and organizations. It then proposes a theory-based model and definition of engagement in public relations. Although digital engagement comprises the bulk of research on engagement within the field of public relations, the literature review will start with the work on the concept of public/stakeholder engagement, as that offers some theoretical directions to compare and contrast with literature from the other two clusters.

2.1. Public/Stakeholder engagement

The *Encyclopedia of Public Relations*' entry titled "Engagement (Stakeholders)" states: "Public relations is founded on the principle that engagement requires an understanding of and dialogue with stakeholders." The entry underscores the importance of *understanding of and dialogue with* stakeholders in maintaining and strengthening relationships between organizations and their publics (Tench, 2013).

Indeed, in most of the literature that attempts to conceptualize public/stakeholder engagement, the notion of engagement has been used most often in conjunction with concepts such as consultation, listening, involvement, openness, and, most importantly, dialogue. These enablers have been further theorized to lead to communicative and relational outcomes, such as cooperation, meaning making, mutual understanding, adjustment, and adaptation between organizations and their publics (Bowen et al., 2010; Comor & Bean, 2012; Gregory, 2004; Kim & Kim, 2015; O'Byrne & Daymon, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Taylor et al., 2003).

In one of the few studies to theorize the meaning of public/stakeholder engagement, Taylor and Kent (2014), after reviewing the literature on engagement in public relations and highlighting the lax definitions of the concept, situated the notion of engagement within dialogue. They conceptualized engagement as an approach and an orientation to ethical communication that could generate mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. To the authors, "engagement is part of dialogue and through engagement, organizations and publics can make decisions that create social capital" (p. 384). Specifically, Taylor and Kent (2014) situated engagement within dialogue's dimension of propinquity, which refers to an organization's openness to interacting with publics and to the idea that publics ought to be consulted in a timely and relevant manner.

Kim and Kim (2015) examined public relations strategy formulation for public engagement. They found that practitioners employed buffering strategies to enact engagement as one-way dissemination of messages, while some others employed bridging strategies that considered engagement a sense-making effort for building and maintaining relationships using dialogue. Similarly, Comor and Bean (2012), while explaining the communicative mechanisms of American public diplomacy, equated engagement with the process of interaction and dialogue. Critiquing the apparent use of dialogic forms of engagement in U.S. public diplomacy, Comor and Bean (2012) argued that engagement with foreign publics more closely resembles persuasive communication aimed at persuading foreign publics to empathize with American policies, rather than being open-ended conversations aimed at giving voice to multiple viewpoints.

Similar to these studies, most scholars who have contributed to conceptualizing definitions of public/stakeholder engagement have emphasized processes of consultation, dialogue, involvement, and open and ethical communication between interacting organizations and their publics (Gregory, 2004; O'Byrne & Daymon, 2014; Taylor et al., 2003), thus equating engagement with communicative interactions between organizations and their publics. One definition of public engagement is an exception, as it treats the concept as being beyond communicative dimensions. Kang (2014) defines public engagement as "a psychologically motivated affective state that brings voluntary extra-role behaviors, and is characterized by affective commitment, positive affectivity and empowerment that an individual public experiences in interactions with an organization over time" (p. 402). This definition adds an affective component to the communicative dimension of engagement that is foregrounded in the definitions reviewed so far. Scholars have also connected engagement with organization-public relationship management, issues management, and ethical communication. Engagement is enacted through dialogue before and after a relationship is established and issues are resolved (Taylor et al., 2003; Wilson, 1996).

A thorough and careful analysis of the above body of work reveals two key aspects. First, by associating engagement with dialogue (Taylor & Kent, 2014; Tench, 2013) and by defining engagement in terms of consultation, interaction, and dissemination of messages (Comor & Bean, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2015), engagement is clearly equated with *communicative interaction* between organizations and their publics. Second, by situating engagement within dialogue (Taylor & Kent, 2014), the idea of engagement is clearly placed within the rhetorical, collaborative modes of communication (dialogue, two-way/multi-way symmetrical models of communication), as

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