

Perspectives on Integrating Social Capital Resources and Networks into the Multiple Roles of Public Relations

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Abstract

While the concept of social capital is widely applied in studies relating to politics, economics, and sociology it is rarely adopted in connection with public relations. Social capital underlies the stimulation of individuals' behaviors and so relates to the establishment of good relationships that public relations also emphasizes. This study explores the connections between the multiple roles that public relation plays and social capital from the perspective of resources and networks. By doing this we anticipate extending research into the operation of public relations.

Keywords: Social Capital, Public Relations, Resources, Networks

PREFACE

Social capital, a popular research concept in recent decades, infuses a multitude of fields that include; sociology, economics, and politics. Due to the range of applications, however, different definitions and explanation about social capital have emerged. Frequently the concept of social capital can be understood as a social context with norms and a "closed" social structure (Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu (1986) explains social capital as classes and networks of relationships. Putnam (1993) explains it as trust, norms, and networks. What is common among these definitions is the integration of networks.

The subject of public relations could be individuals, organizations or the public. Public relations play a key role in forming and maintaining the networks between associating groups. This is particularly critical in a world with the rapid flow of information facilitated by information technology. Public relations plays a diverse set of roles that includes addressing staff in organizations, the public, customers, communities and sponsors. This study explores these multiple roles from the viewpoint of social capital.

THE LINK BETWEEN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bourdieu (1986) considers social capital as the sum of actual or potential resources that accrue within a stable network. Such resources are a form of common capital that all members can exploit. From Bourdieu's point of view, the level of social capital is determined by two factors: first, the ability to effectively mobilize the network; and second the forms (e.g., economic, cultural and symbolic) and amount of capital amounts owned by members. In Coleman's (1988) terms, social capital infers different kinds of entities, all of which have two features in common: first, they all include some perspectives in social structure; second, they can help to achieve social acts. Coleman (1990) argues that social capital is a resource in the form of social structures. From this perspective, social capital is the social resource that exists in both individual and interpersonal relationships.

Bourdieu (1986) regards social capital as the maintenance of a network of relationships. From this position, social capital belongs to groups, and they can apply it to strengthen their reputation. Coleman (1988), by contrast, views takes a structural view on social capital. This positions social capital as a means of strengthening norms between members that act to establish and maintain order. Bourdieu's and Coleman's definitions are from the unit or organization points of view. The main purpose of public relation is to increase the unity within a group and thereby increase efficiency. This aligns with the goal of maintaining networks and complying with regulations under social capital.

Putnam (1995), drawing on Coleman (1988) extends social capital from a personal to a group perspective. This work anchors in the field of politics and emphasizes the relationship between systems' achievement and the quantity and quality of social capital that in an organization, a region, or even a country owns. The word, society, is used to refer to the characteristics of social lives. This notion of society helps participants to pursue mutually held goals more efficiently through networks based on norms, and trust. This indicates how social capital represents an element that accelerates cooperation and efficiency in social organization.

Social capital is interpreted from a political point of view in Putnam's (1995) theory. This work reveals how social capital accrues value from social efficiency and mutual cooperation. Public relations, from this point of view, is about social conscientiousness which develops through practice and facilitates the creation of value within the group. Social awareness is the catalysis for the achievement of a democratic system as it leads governments, and organizations to place importance on social responsibilities and the public interest. All these perspectives indicate how social capital and public relations are closely related.

Lin (1982, 1999, 2001) believes that capital is an investment in the market which is predicted to create return values. Social capital is a resource that can be accrued or disposed of during planned activities. Social capital emphasizes the significance of achieving goals through social connections and social relations which facilitates the accomplishment of individuals', groups' and communities' goals.

From the viewpoint of resource, Lin analyzes social capital as an investment that creates return value. Normally, organizations consider public relations as a bridge of communication, Marston (1979) brings up the concept of RACE (research, action, communication and, evaluation) for the successful practice of public relations. From plans to activities, public relations is regarded as an important resource. Through public relations, favorable impressions or trust develops and results in preferable responses such as positive behaviors.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL RESOURCE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS

Lin (2001) asserts that social capital is a resource from social networks that can help strengthen the result of actions. This assertion rests on four premises. First, information movements become easier. Generally, most markets are imperfect. However, if individuals (and particularly those in senior positions) share information this can be valuable. Second, some degree of social solidarity empowers decision makers to access more valuable resources and these associates with greater influence in their positions. Third, by revealing social credentials, this reveals that resources are not confined to particular individuals. Fourth, social capital anticipates a greater degree of identification and perception. Individuals, as group members, enhance their value when others admit that they own a particular resource in public.

The link between social capital and action reflects the need to remain within a particular position that can provide useful information, to relate valuable resource and power, and to obtain public recognition and trust. Grunig and Grunig (1991) believe that the purpose of public relation operations differs from that of advertisement or marketing. The later mainly focuses on the fulfillment of consumers' and clients' demands in order to make a profit. The purpose, however, of public relations is to stimulate mutual understanding and to develop relationships with different publics, and so does the purpose of social capital.

There are two kinds of acquirable and usable resources, personal and social resources (Lin, 1982). Personal resource, owned by individuals, includes ownership of materials and symbolic items; such as, certificates of technical proficiency or academic degrees. Social resources derive from individuals' social connections and so are determined by the diversity and richness of their connections with society.

Lin (2001) explores two resources that stem from social solidarity. First, the permanent or temporary resources owned by members. Second, the resources individuals control by dint of their position. The position resource of social solidarity is generally more useful than personal resources in terms of power, wealth, and reputation. Individuals extend their personal capital by connecting with organizations. .

The value of public relations as a resource is commonly realized through development of an organization's image. Public relations utilize communication tools; such as, commercials, blogs and interactive Internet media to facilitate interaction within the community. The aim of public relations is not to communicate in one direction (e.g., through attempts to convince an audience through advertisement) but rather to activate communication that encourages integration between individuals. This involves focusing on conversations and communication between organizations and certain group of subjects. Enterprises must keep in touch with changes in their external environmental and judge the impact of these changes. This enables them to adapt their image to reflect the fit between their own resources and environmental circumstances. This reveals how public relations engage with a range of social connections.

Social capital resources exist in two different formats, available resource and unavailable resource. Available resources are preserved through expressive action. In order to preserve the existing resources, it is necessary to approach the one who is in control of resources by making empathetic expressions of support to obtain the embedded resources. This allows claims on resource to be recognized, legalized and shared. Unavailable resources, in contrast, are obtained through instrumental actions that reflect the search for additional resources. The main goal is to stimulate others' reactions and behavior in order that they bring additional resources (Lin, 2001).

Public relations activities reveal various viewpoints about the use of resources. These resources are designed to trigger both emotions and associating instrumental behaviors. Community public relations is a good example of how emotional behaviors can be stimulated. There is a close interrelationship between communities and organizations. It is important for organizations to develop friendly interactions and communications with their publics. In terms of the instrumental behaviors of public relations, organizations mainly focus on marketing and broadcasting (e.g., through product advertisements). When launching new products creative public relations activities are used to heighten brand awareness and to stimulate sales. This is an example of instrumental behaviors in public relations.

SOCIAL CAPITAL NETWORKS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Networks are usually represented as pyramids with few occupiers at the top (Lin, 1982). These structures can be understood horizontally or vertically. In vertical structures the higher levels generally have more power. Roles in the horizontal position utilize each others' relations to exchange different resources and information. Lin (2001) argues that the development of social networks reflects the interests, and different interests lead nodes to different positions in the networks. The nodes in the networks provide possibilities for others in the networks to access resources.

In most organizations the public relations department interacts with other organizations through horizontal links. In organizations, public relations, as compared with other departments; such as, manufacturing or research and development, generally have better resources to communicate and transit information with other organizations. Public relation departments usually report directly to presidents or vice-presidents. In international organizations, reporting systems are dual-tracked, which mean reports are filed directly to local supervisors and indirectly to public relation managers. This reveals how public relation departments have a high position vertically in organizations that gives them extensive access to information.

In public relations employing a spokesman is common practice. Schiffman & Kanuk (2004) divide spokesmen into several different categories: celebrities, specialists, publics, and executives. Celebrities refer to well-known people; such as, entertainers or sports players. Specialists are those in a profession or with special experience that gives them a unique social status.

Over half a century ago, Homans (1950) pointed out that the frequency of individuals' interactions determines their behaviors and the extent to which they share emotions. Homans' main point is that emotion and interaction are positively related. The basis of interactions is emotion, which includes love, respect, and sympathy. Spokesmen utilize their social links to target the public with events because of their high social capital. Spokesmen facilitate interactions that develop networks which, in turn, associate with increases in the sales volume of products.

CONCLUSION

Social capital has been widely applied in studies of economics, politics and sociology. However, exploration of social capital in public relations remains limited. Public relations emphasize the development of relationships with different publics and therefore the notion of efficient development of networks is important. The success of public relations is judged by whether relationships are well developed or not. Social capital is defined by whether specific intentions and certain behaviors have effects or not. If certain object in a social structure is helpful for individual's intentional action, then is defined as social capital (Coleman, 1990). Social capital and the success of actions are positively correlated. This means that obtaining and using better social capital can bring about more successful actions.

There are many different perspectives on public relations. For organizations there are internal and external public relations. Publics can be divided into categories; such as, government, consumers, employees, and communities. There are three kinds of measures of social capital: wealth, power, and reputation (Lin, 2001). Wealth symbolizes economic assets and when applied to public relations in non-profit organizations, refers to the solicitation of donations.

Power represents political assets, which generally apply to political public relations. Reputation refers to social assets. The similarity between social capital and public relations reflects the achievement of a certain purpose. Therefore, by integrating the notion of social capital into public relations we can effectively broaden the field.

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