Making Sense of Public Relations: Australian Government Communication in the Lead-up to the Iraq War

by


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Australian Government Communication in the Lead-up to the Iraq War, 2002-2003

In March, 2003, Australian troops joined the US-led ‘coalition of the willing’ along with the UK and several other countries to invade Iraq. The Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, justified this action on a number of grounds including that it was necessary to counter the ‘twin evils of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD)’.(Howard 2003) Government communication in this context can be understood as a form of public relations – ‘the deliberate management of public image and information in pursuit of organisational’ and, in this case, governmental, ‘interests’. (Cottle 2003)

How are we to understand the role of public relations in this case? In this paper, I want to place this discussion within an important debate in the critical tradition of media studies. Many studies of public relations in this tradition, such as those undertaken by Stuart Hall, have drawn heavily on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. (Schlesinger 1990) Gramsci (cited in Kellner 1995:31) argued that cultural institutions such as schools and the media ‘served to induce consent to the dominant order establishing the hegemony, or ideological dominance, of a specific type of social order’ – for example, liberal capitalism or communism. However, this theory has been subject to challenge. (see Schlesinger 1990) An alternative to hegemony is provided in Foucault’s theories of ‘power-knowledge’. (Foucault 1980)

Below, I discuss the strengths and limitations of hegemony theory before examining the case of Australia and the Iraq War. As part of my PhD research on the role of public relations in security issues, I have interviewed 40 public relations practitioners and former and serving Australian government officials. Here I provide a short analysis of interviews with four interviewees. Three of these were senior officials in the Howard government in 2002-3 who were involved in developing public communication on the
Iraq policy, and the other is a senior liberal party member and a former ministerial adviser. I discuss this case, in the light of theories provided by both Gramsci and Foucault. I argue that whilst hegemony theory provides good tools for analysing the role of public relations in this case, it has its limitations. On the other hand, Foucault’s theories of power-knowledge may well provide better tools.

**Hegemony theory**

In this theory, public relations practitioners can be understood as ‘discourse technologists … who play a central role in the maintenance and transformation of discourse.’ (Motion and Leach cited in Motion and Weaver 2005:50) Taking this approach, Motion and Weaver (2005) argue that public relations seeks to establish a certain version of ‘the truth’ which aligns with the interests of its clients or a dominant coalition. Through this process, they argue, public relations establishes these interests as ‘the public interest’. However, the hegemony model also allows us to see a more complex set of contestations in which subordinate groups can challenge the production of meaning. As Bennett (1998:68) writes, Gramscian theory:

> …is concerned to analyse the descending flows of cultural and ideological power and the degree to which these are successfully countered by countervailing cultural and ideological influences arising from the conditions of life of the popular classes.

Although Gramsci provides powerful analytical tools, Schlesinger (1990) and others have pointed out serious limitations. I focus on Bennett’s (1998) critique. He argues that Gramsci understands power as ‘arising from a highly unified and centralized origin’ and is ‘centred in the ruling class or power bloc.’ (Bennett 1998:68-69) Furthermore, he observes, Gramsci understands power only in terms of consent. (see also Hindess 1996) According to Bennett (1998) in hegemony theory, cultural production is viewed simply in terms of one function – to maintain ideological control. In this view, all major ideological apparatuses – including the PR industry – are dedicated to winning the active support for (not simply obedience) – and participation in – projects of the ruling class. This view, he argues, privileges the ideological contest over meaning. As Bennett (1998:69) writes, in
hegemony theory, ‘it is the battle of ideas that matters most.’ In sum, hegemony theory relies on a single problematic of power-as-consent.

This conception of power limits the scope for analysis of public relations. Bennett (1998:69) argues that all cultural processes tend to be explained by referring to a ‘generalised theory of consent whose mechanisms remain the same across the whole cultural field.’ The implication of this for the study of public relations is that there may be more happening than a two-way contest over meaning which entrenched power interests usually dominate. Certain aspects of public relations may well be explained by other dynamics. It is not that Gramsci is wrong but the study of PR requires tools which better provide for the complexity and fluidity of the power relations which are connected to these processes. In contrast to hegemony theory, Foucauldian theories of ‘power-knowledge’ conceive of power as ‘being dispersed in its operation and constitution’ (Bennett 1998:68) and recognise that power is not simply based on consent but also derives from material practices (Foucault 1980). I now turn to an analysis of the Australian case before discussing it in the light of both hegemony and Foucauldian theories.

**Iraq case**

From mid 2002 (or possibly earlier), the Australian government was on a war footing and prepared to support a US invasion. The government was committed to a policy of ‘keeping the pressure on’ Saddam Hussein and ‘building the pressure on him’ (senior government official) in the lead-up to the War. One senior official told me, that although ‘you don’t know exactly … what was going to happen,’ his view in mid-2002 was that ‘there could be a war over Iraq and we shouldn’t be appeasing Saddam Hussein’. (On Australian war planning see Australia. Dept. of Defence 2004) With regard to how the government communicated on the Iraq issue with the public, several key themes were identified in the interviews with participants.

1. Rational communication with the public
Officials recognised in the lead-up to the war that the impending invasion would be unpopular in Australia. For example, one remembered that ‘the polls were very divided’ on the issue of Iraq:

…In part there is a group out there who would oppose it on principle but there are lots of other people who opposed it on other grounds of ideology – they either weren’t convinced that there were weapons of mass destruction or they didn’t see something in Iraq as being salient to their concerns.

Partly because of this division in opinion there was a need to communicate with the public so that they understood the government’s rationale for its policy and what it saw as the main issues in relation to Iraq. Two of the senior officials that I spoke to mentioned this point. As one said:

…[We were] explaining to them what the Australian government’s position was and why the Australian government’s position was as it was. You owe it to people … I always took the view that the public had a right to know what we thought in any manner of international issues whether [Australia was] involved with them or not.

2. Leading the public

Participants noted that communication involved not only engaging the public but also leading it. As one senior government official said:

…These are not matters that you can deal with covertly and commit people to an operation abroad and just whistle ‘Dixie’ and say we will only tell people something if it goes wrong. You have got to bring people with you. Howard did that very well he would explain what the risks were and he would say – you know in his inimitable way – it is not something that he would be wanting to do but there are reasons for it and these were the reasons.

Similarly, this official pays homage to the democratic values of public engagement. However, we can note that he introduces a second element of this process – the need to lead the people. As this official indicates, above, the rationale for public communication in this case is to implement the government’s policy on Iraq, rather than to invite the
public to influence that policy. Other participants supported this view. One said that the government’s aim was to put the government’s case and to neutralise – if not persuade – those who opposed the war.

… Essentially [the aim of communication was to put] … a rationale and a justification for the government’s position rather than pretending that you might persuade a lot of people who might otherwise remain in violent disagreement with you about the thing…. The best we would hope for is neutralising as opposed to persuading or bringing people across.

3. The message needs to resonate with the public

Another common theme was that government communication – both generally speaking and specifically on this issue – needed to resonate with the public if the strategy was to be effective. Though there was a place for objective facts and argument in this it was to be done more by connecting with people’s experience. According to one senior official, in election campaigns, a key message can be:

… emotionally truthful in the sense of tapping the feelings of people. Even though you may argue the toss about whether it has been accurate in every regard about what it is representing. … Facts and things can be used to rationalise and justify doing something but to get people to accept a proposition you do have to tell them a story in effect – connect with them. Make them desire to change or whatever.

I asked him how the Prime Minister and the key ministers connected with the public in communication leading up to the Iraq War. He replied that:

… I think the only basis … on which you could connect on there is to say to people: … ‘Look, I know you have reservations about this but based on what I have seen to date and my experience as a leader in evaluating these situations, trust me, we probably have to do something about it.’ [We were] seeking therefore to engage those people who are wavering to say: ‘Yeah well, on balance he [Howard] has been a strong leader who tries to do the right thing he
stands up for Australia he is not one to tolerate terrorists and bad people. So if he wants to do this, well, maybe we should trust him to do it.’

The first element of this process is that the communication is not directed at the public as a collective but to a targeted section of the public – the minority of people ‘in the middle’. Then the task is to connect with their existing experiences and perceptions by firstly building on the trust that people have in the community for John Howard as a strong leader who will protect them. The powerful symbols of nationalism and good versus evil are also deployed.

**Analysis**

Using the hegemony theory, analysis of the data suggests that the Australian government needed to engage in a dialogue with the public to gain enough public backing to implement its policy on the Iraq War. A variety of public relations techniques were used including opinion polling, message development, targeting of particular audiences and use of symbolism to engage with audiences on an emotional level. Following Motion and Weaver (2005) we can understand that authorities used these techniques to establish one version of the truth regarding the Iraq War – that it was it was in Australia’s national interest to invade. The approach of officials in this case showed this attempt involves joining in a battle of ideas. Whilst officials did not seek to ‘win’ the enthusiastic support of the majority of the population, they nevertheless sought to win the trust of a crucial segment. This demonstrates that the dominance of official truth is never assured but always subject to challenge.

The strength of this analysis is that it allows us to see the dominance of government in the political debates and also recognise the dynamic and fluid aspects of the cultural field. Yet it is also limited by its reliance on a single problematic of power. All of the processes which are observed are explained by reference to a contest of ideas between hegemonic forces – represented in this case by government officials – and counter-hegemonic forces – popular opinion that was opposed to, or wavering in its support for, the war.
Alternatively, Foucault (1980) conceptualises power as omnidirectional and originating at all points throughout the social field. Foucault also distinguishes between relationships of domination which may become fixed and stable and other relationships of power which are to more fluid and reversible. (Hindess 1996) Because of this, his theory can account for the dominance of authorities such as the governments over the cultural field by their deployment of technologies of power such as public relations. Foucault (1980) understood ‘truth’ as an historically contingent object which emerged from material practices of power. He was not concerned with answering the question ‘what is truth?’ in terms of meaning – for example, whether ‘x’ is true or ‘y’ is false. Foucault (1980:132) did not understand truth as:

… ‘the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted,’ but rather, ‘the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true.’

So, he was concerned with the process by which something comes to be accepted as true or false. (as noted by Weavers 1997)

In applying this approach to the Australian case that I described above, we would not ask how the government sought to establish a particular version of the truth in terms of meaning – for example that the US invasion policy was in the ‘public interest’. Rather, we would ask how ‘truth’ and the ‘public’ have been constituted in public relations practice so that such claims were accepted as valid in political debates and in mass media discourse. In this case, we can note that claims used in government communication were considered appropriate not so much because of their basis in fact but because of their ability to connect with the experiences of target audiences. Hence the policy of invading Iraq was not presented in terms of scientific evidence for the existence of WMD for example, but in terms of trusting John Howard to make the best judgement call on how convincing the evidence was. With regard to constituting ‘the public’, we can see how officials drew on norms in public relations to imagine the public in particular ways. One was that the public was rational and engaged in the democratic process of political debate yet requiring leadership from enlightened and responsible elites. Another was that the public was not united but fragmented and therefore more susceptible to leadership. Yet
another was that important segments of the public were capable of political engagement
more on an emotive rather than rational level. Further genealogical research is needed to
identify how such norms for constituting ‘truth’ and ‘the public’ emerged from the
historical context in which this government communication took place.

Conclusion:
My concern has been to begin an evaluation of the strengths and limitations of Gramsci’s
theory of hegemony for the study of public relations (PR) whilst comparing it to
Foucauldian theories of power-knowledge. I have done this by briefly reviewing some
literature and then analysing the case of Australian government communication in the
lead-up to the Iraq War (2003-) in the light of both theories. I have argued that Gramsci
provides good tools for analysing PR in this case. However, in order to allow for the
fluidity and unpredictability of power relations operating in public relations we need
better tools than he provides. Foucault’s theories may provide such tools. I have
suggested that one way we can apply his theories in this context is by examining how PR
helps to constitute ‘the truth’ and ‘the public’. However, much work needs to be done in
this area and there are some questions which I have yet been able to address. Two
important questions are: Can Foucault’s concepts be used as an adjunct to hegemony
theory or are they incompatible? How can we use his concepts to both identify the
processes through which dominant groups and institutions exercise power over the
governed and to understand how these mechanisms work?

References


