The impact of public relations and promotional communication on human rights, inequalities and social justice: Interdisciplinary reflections and future directions

ICA 2024 Post-Conference
Division Sponsors: Public Relations and Popular Media and Culture

Call for Papers

Since the publication of *Critical Public Relations* (L’Etang & Pieczka, 1996) - the first major scholarly work focused exclusively on developing a critical approach to power in public relations (PR) – interdisciplinary research examining the role of PR in the production of inequalities and the fight for social justice has grown rapidly, and now constitutes a significant scholarly grouping in the field. Research has examined how PR is used by social movements to promote change, support marginalised groups, and resist exploitation, as well as how it is used to sustain elites and prevent changes in the distribution of power across society.

Over the same period, interest has grown in the importance of other forms of promotional communication for both dominant groups and activist movements resisting domination and promoting change. In the context of promotional culture, an environment where promotional practices, enacted by promotional intermediaries and focused on types of product, audience, communications media and messages, are used across a wide range of sectors and have become part of day-to-day life (Davis, 2013), detailed and nuanced analyses of these practices have emerged. They appear in a wide range of fields, including humanitarian communication, environmental communication, social movement theory, critical consumption studies, popular culture, development communication, and many other areas.

Scholars have adopted a wide range of interdisciplinary insights (e.g. political economy, humanitarian communication, cultural studies, queer theory, feminist theory, post-colonial theory, critical race theory) to provide new ways of interrogating the power exercised by promotional professions, including public relations, in these contexts. Together, they provide detailed analyses of the promotional professions’ political, economic and socio-cultural impact, embracing theories and empirical sites that extend our thinking far beyond functional deconstructions of organisational practice in the global North and West. They reorient our scholarship to consider how promotion can be used flexibly, in a range of settings and using a range of tools, for collective rather than individual ends – giving voice to subaltern groups and supporting their struggles (Chaidaroon & Hou, 2021; Dutta, 2016), as well as providing agency in global crises such as climate change (Munshi and Kurian, 2021).

This kind of research illustrates the central role of PR and promotional communication for human rights and humanitarian organisations, activist movements, and movements for social change, as well as insights into how promotion is used by their opponents to contest and deflect their claims. It reveals not only the scale of promotional work deployed in the context of struggles for greater equality and recognition of different groups in different contexts, but
also the complex power dynamics that using promotional techniques inevitably invites. While promotion may help to increase the profile of an issue such as violence against women and girls, for example, it also raises the spectre of surveillance and increases the risk of gender-based violence (e.g. Jiménez-Martínez & Edwards, 2023; Megarry, 2017). Targeted promotion may support the circulation of vital information for marginalised groups and their allies, but effective targeting may also enhance their isolation by failing to engage and persuade new audiences about their struggles (Bruns, 2019). And in the context of public relations capitalism (Cronin, 2018), policies presented to us as a political choice may well be little more than a corporate preference.

More broadly, questions about the potential empowerment offered by and through promotional work persist. Collaborative practices between corporate, NGO, third sector and activist organisations suggest that promotion is one way to showcase compromise and progress. Nonetheless, the co-existence of silence and secrecy with visibility and circulation, as key promotional tactics (Aronczyk, 2013; Cronin, 2018; Dimitrov, 2018) reinforce the fact that questions of power and self-interest are never far from promotion, no matter how altruistic the message.

Opportunities still exist to enrich and develop this work by adopting a more interdisciplinary and collaborative approach. Some steps have been taken in this direction: Logan and Ciszek (2021), for example, have explored how dialogue between queer theory and critical race theory shed light on the lives of PR practitioners of colour and their work; others have articulated critical theory with postcolonialism, critical race theory (Logan, 2023; Pomper, 2005), indigenous theory (Clarke et al, 2021) and globalisation (Munshi & Pal, 2018), to better understand promotional culture. Nonetheless, scholars can still slip into siloed thinking, deepening knowledge in their own specialist area but missing the added insights that come from debates with colleagues taking a different approach. Conversations about public relations and promotional practices, between colleagues with different disciplinary underpinnings (e.g. public relations and humanitarian communication; critical consumption studies and environmental communication) have the potential to expand and add depth to the theoretical and empirical topographies of our investigations.

In this post-conference, we aim to extend the potential of existing research by fostering productive, interdisciplinary conversations between scholars from across media and communications who have an interest in the influence of public relations and other promotional professions on struggles over rights, inequalities and social justice. Papers will respond to the main conference theme and align with recent calls to adopt a more human-centred and socially impactful approach to research (Ciszek, Place, & Logan, 2022; Munshi & Kurian, 2020; Waisbord, 2020).

We invite papers that engage critically with PR and other promotional industries, tools and practices, as well as the ambivalence that promotion introduces both for those who claim rights and recognition, and for those who try to preserve their own power and privilege. Submissions may address, but are not limited to, the following questions:
1. What role can PR and promotional practice play in making sense of and working to heal the widespread suffering of human and non-human beings?
2. What tensions and contradictions characterise the ways in which PR and promotional tools are used to pursue human rights, social justice and equality?
3. What methodological challenges might an orientation towards human rights, inequalities and social justice bring for research on PR and promotional communication?
4. How can scholars of PR and promotion reconcile the contemporary ‘wicked problems’ that underpin current global crises, with the theoretical tools at their disposal? What new theories and methods are needed to address these crises?
5. What can a more robust theoretical and empirical ‘conversation’ between scholars of public relations and promotional communication offer, in the pursuit of more impactful, justice-oriented scholarship?
6. In what ways do PR and promotional theories shed light on contemporary crises, and how can the empirical reality of contemporary crises extend our theoretical thinking?
7. Within a socio-political landscape characterized by acute polarization that makes dialogic, deliberative communication difficult, what can critical theory offer to scholars of PR and promotional communication?
8. How can PR and promotional research and practice address the structural inequalities and systematic issues that prevent the fulfilment of human rights across different contexts (e.g., environmental crisis, health care, disaster management)?
9. How can PR and promotional communications leverage/navigate the advantages of digital technology, tools, and platforms to advance rights, equality and social justice, while not losing sight of the entrenched digital divisions across different socio-cultural groups?
10. What (new) insights can a critical, human-centred approach to PR and promotional communication theory and practice provide about our collective (in)humanity in the digital age?

We welcome submissions from scholars at all stages of their career, a wide spectrum of disciplinary perspectives, as well as contributions that focus on marginalised locations and populations, and forms of promotion that have received limited attention from scholars thus far. Theoretical and empirical contributions will provide a springboard for panel discussions and roundtables that build bridges between existing work, explore new directions for collaborative research, and reflect on the potential for our research to play a more active and powerful role in the pursuit of a more just and equal world.

Abstract submission and notification of acceptance

Abstracts of 500 words should be submitted to the conference email PromoPostCon2024@gmail.com by January 26, 2024. Submissions should include author names, affiliations, and the contact information for the corresponding author.
Acceptance notifications will be provided by February 23, 2024 and the full programme will be released on 26 April 2024.

Any questions about the post-conference or submission may be directed to the conference email, PromoPostCon2024@gmail.com

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References


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