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PUBLIC RELATIONS CAPITALISM

Promotional Culture, Publics and Commercial Democracy

Anne M. Cronin

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract In this chapter Cronin outlines the key argument of the book—today we are witnessing a profound shift in the public's engagement with the social contract as the basis of democracy and public relations, alongside other forms of promotional culture, plays a central role in this new development. New forms of 'the public' and 'publicity' are being created, and significant changes in social values are being forged in the context of neoliberal capitalism. Cronin argues that a new 'commercial democracy' is emerging which transforms politics and political engagement, politicising promotional culture in new ways.

Keywords Public relations • Democracy • Capitalism • Promotional culture

Often seen as the purveyor of 'spin,' manipulation, or outright lies, the public relations industry has a very negative public image. This book presents the case that PR should be assessed in a more nuanced way while also arguing that, in one key respect, PR's social and political impact is far more detrimental than that suggested by straightforward critiques of its partisanship or mendacity. I argue that a new relationship is being forged between political culture and commercial culture that is mediated by PR and other promotional industries. This shifts the terrain of politics and creates a form of *commercial democracy* that rearticulates public engagement

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and social values. Any attempt to understand people's disenchantment with contemporary representative democracy and neoliberal capitalist commercial culture should take into consideration the enhanced significance of PR and other promotional forms which now interface in far more profound ways with the foundations for social and political organisation and stability.

PR is used by organisations, governments, elites, and the wealthy as a mode of exerting influence and control, and some analyses present PR as an anti-democratic force that sets out to warp the flow of information that is provided by the media to inform the public. Other accounts present PR as a potentially democratic force, offering voice to various groups, providing 'public engagement,' and staging public debate. PR is also used by activists, NGOs, and charities as a form of resistance and political intervention or a way of altering the terms of public debate. This framing of a phenomenon's significance as a tension between positive potential and negative impact—and between power and control set in contrast to subversion and resistance—is a familiar trope in media and cultural studies research. My account of PR takes a rather different angle of analysis. Based on empirical research, I focus on PR's implication in what has been called the 'democratic deficit' and current shifts in the public's (dis)engagement with, and distrust of, formal politics, government, the state, and its institutions. The research for this book is based on the UK, but the scope of my argument extends to other European countries and beyond. Accounts such as Wendy Brown's (2015) argue that neoliberal democracies have been evacuated of true democratic content while retaining *discourses* of democracy, freedom, choice, representation, and public voice. I argue that public relations has come to inhabit and exploit this democratic gap, speaking the language of democracy and offering to both publics and organisations modes of engagement, agency, and voice. As such, PR forms a key element in the broader 'public engagement' industry (Lee 2015) in which governments and state institutions increasingly set up forms of 'stakeholder engagement' to act as the public voice that is required to legitimise policy initiatives. My account builds on work such as Lee's (2015) but presents a different perspective by arguing that PR intervenes in political and social processes on a more fundamental level—the level of the 'social contract.' The social contract is a bond or promise established between government and the people in which government undertakes to represent the people and the public interest, while the public agrees to submit to democratic processes of representation and the rule of law.

Drawing on Hannah Arendt's (1998 [1958]) work on the social contract as 'promise,' I argue that PR's relationship both to the public and to its commercial clients can be understood as a form of promise that displaces politics and rearticulates people's engagement with conventional representative democracy. In reformulating the social contract or promise, PR and other promotional industries offer a form of 'commercial democracy' which has far-reaching social and political consequences.

The book's empirical research is based on PR practices in UK corporations and in charities. It uses the major shifts in public engagement in the social contract as the starting point for drawing out the new significance of brands and corporations' reputation and for analysing how charities mediate social values in a new way. Some would argue that PR simply follows and promotes the logics of capital using its capacities for interest-driven communication and skills in manipulation. But I argue that PR is an active transformational force rather than simply a transparent medium. PR acts to create publics, shape a stage for public dialogue, and promise a form of democratic representation and agency. In this way, PR certainly amplifies neoliberal capitalism's practices and ideologies, but it also enacts something new in terms of 'publicity' and politics. I argue that promotional culture now interfaces explicitly with the social contract and thus attains a new, heightened social and political significance.

Chapter 2 situates the book within a range of debates in PR and promotional culture and contextualises my argument in relation to key discussions about neoliberal capitalism and democracy, public engagement, the creation of publics and 'publicity,' and the media and the public sphere and outlines Hannah Arendt's work on the social contract as 'promise.' I introduce empirical data from my project when sketching out the contemporary UK media context and PR's intervention in this shifting context. Chapter 3 focuses on PR produced by corporations. Through an analysis of the everyday practices of PR and an account of PR in times of crisis for a corporation, I argue that contemporary PR has begun to offer what I term *commercial democracy*. PR associated with corporations, commodities, and brands now operates through promising forms of representation, voice, and agency, while public faith in conventional representative democracy has declined. The phenomenon of 'consumer citizenship' has been tracked by academics for some time, examining the ways in which consumer culture and consumption offer experiences of agency, identity, pleasure, and status (as citizen, as political actor). But commercial democracy shifts the terrain of politics by forging important links between the social contract as foundational basis for

the public's acceptance of democracy to forms of commercial culture embodied in corporations, commodities, and brands and mediated by PR (and other promotional forms such as advertising and marketing). Commercial democracy is a new vernacular form of democracy that speaks the language of representation and agency but is disconnected from the practices and formal legitimacy of conventional representative democracy. It displaces the political and, in the public's eyes, it relocates politics, power, and agency to the popular, the everyday, and especially to consumption.

Forms of commercial democracy have gained purchase in the UK through years of austerity measures, the erosion of public faith in politicians, establishment institutions, and the formal apparatus of democracy. I examine how PR enacts promises to the public that hold considerable appeal in this context of disenchantment. PR appears to mirror the contract or bond of representative democracy by offering multiple promises to the public: in mediating between a corporation or institution and the public PR promises representation; it promises public 'voice' through their engagement as consumers or stakeholders; it provides a media forum and stages debate. It is part of, and attempts to shape, the realm in which the public witnesses itself as a collective entity. This collective witnessing is a form of 'publicity' as described by Michael Warner (2002). This promise of publicity offered by PR—the promise of being part of a public—has all the more force as it is not associated with formal state institutions which have lost so much public trust. I show how an analysis of the social contract as promise, as a foundational social bond between the public and those who govern, provides traction for understanding the major shifts and realignments that are occurring between political culture and commercial culture. In this analysis I offer a new account of the social and political significance of brands and corporate reputation. Using crisis PR as an example, I argue that the intensity of the public's investment in the promise (as a form of social contract) can be seen in people's reaction to the breaking of promises. This, I maintain, is at the core of reputation and brand. For corporations, PR's role is to enhance and repair reputation, buffering them at times of crisis when, for example, a corporation is exposed as misleading the public. Considerable research on PR focuses on this reputational repair function, but my account instead emphasises PR's newly intensified relationship to core social bonds. The force of the outrage of perceived corporate lying or manipulation, which clearly impacts on a corporation's reputation, does not reside precisely in the untruth, I argue, but in the breaching of the commercial promise.

Chapter 4 focuses on a different dimension of PR-mediated promises by analysing communications in the UK charity sector. The chapter contextualises charities' shifting social and political position, highlighting their enhanced role in social service provision as the neoliberal state withdraws from that terrain. The chapter takes as its core focus the shift in public values and emotional investment in charities that is mediated by promises offered by the charity sector. I argue that PR offers a particular form of 'publicity' in relation to charity communications. This involves an implicit or explicit promise to define, uphold, and enact social values (that are no longer primarily defined by politicians, church leaders, or government policies) linked to a promise of a specific form of publicity (as a mode through which the people can recognise themselves as the collective called 'the public'). I argue that the emotional freight of charity communications does not simply reside in shocking images or striking text but in the public perception that charity promises are being broken.

Chapter 5 concludes the book by arguing that a key characteristic of UK society today is a *dissonance* between: (1) conventional democratic promises of political representation, (2) commercial promises offered by corporations and their brands, and (3) promises offered by charities and other bodies that are based on social values. The chapter broadens the book's analysis by arguing that we are witnessing an intensification of the significance of *commercial speech* (PR, advertising, marketing, and associated forms) because this is the realm that now hosts the brokering of promises or social contracts. Using Hannah Arendt's (1972) work on lying and the imagination, this chapter links the growth of the significance of commercial speech to debates in 'post-truth' politics while arguing that PR practitioners are not best understood today as cultural intermediaries but as *social brokers* to reflect their role in brokering promises or social and political bonds.

The book is based on empirical data collected through 50 interviews with PR practitioners from a range of UK sectors and specialisms, analysis of communications outputs (press releases, news stories, website material, etc.), analysis of PR principles presented by trade organisations, analysis of communications and lobbying regulation, and some observation material from within organisations. My focus is not primarily the textual products of communications practices but the practices themselves, the mode of mediation, and their relationship to the social, political, and economic context. My account is not representative of all forms of PR and does not attempt to capture all aspects of PR's significance. Instead, I concentrate

on what I consider to be a crucial development in PR's relationship to social organisation more broadly, and promotional culture more specifically—its imbrication with the established fundamentals of the social contract, bond, or promise that bind people to forms of governance and at the same time create the virtual object called 'the public.' I analyse how 'the public' as virtual object and subject position is created, but I have not engaged in empirical research on the people who constitute this public. This is an avenue for future research and one that seems today to have heightened political significance.

Throughout the process of writing the book, I have been mindful of Hannah Arendt's (1972) caution about the lure of theory and its relation to reality. In her account of lying and the US Pentagon Papers scandal of 1971, Arendt notes the rise of advisors, think tanks, and professional 'problem-solvers' who were often drawn from universities and government departments. These individuals were characterised by 'great self-confidence' and were 'in love with "theory," the world of sheer mental effort' (Arendt 1972: 10–11):

> They were eager to find formulas, preferably expressed in a pseudo-mathematical language, that would unify the most disparate phenomena with which reality presented them; that is, they were eager to discover *laws* by which to explain and predict political and historical facts as though they were as necessary, and thus as reliable, as the physicists once believed natural phenomena to be. (Arendt 1972: 11)

However, they were dealing not with natural laws but with human affairs that derive from our capacity for agency. There is a temptation for such professional problem-solvers, Arendt (1972: 12) suggests, 'to fit their reality—which after all was man-made to begin with and thus could have been otherwise—into their theory, thereby mentally getting rid of its disconcerting *contingency*.' The argument I am proposing thus aims to capture a sense of the important shifts in the contemporary relationship between political culture and commercial culture while acknowledging the openness of such developments and the possibilities for alternative interpretations. Although patterned by neoliberal capitalism's ideologies and practices, the social and political shifts that I will outline are not determined or closed down by those same ideologies and practices. Indeed, 'the public' that is engendered through forms of publicity and promises mediated by PR is radically open and cannot be fully contained by the

forces that helped shape its creation. Nor are the long-term outcomes of such social and political developments clear, but it is my hope that this book will offer some tools and insights to aid in their analysis.

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