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How is public relations to fulfill the community-building role some claim for it when the community faces a major disruptive threat? This paper explores that question in the context of local impacts of global climate change. It proposes adopting a community development strategy to help build local capacity to handle major risks.

New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Helen Clark, has identified “issues around sustainability and climate change” as “the compelling issues of our time, dominating international forums and agendas” (Prime Minister’s Statement, 2007). In a speech to Parliament, Ms Clark went further, proposing that New Zealand seek to become “the first nation to become truly sustainable” in the way its economy, society, environment and nationhood are managed, suggesting that such a commitment would define the country in the way its notable nuclear-free stance has done for more than two decades.

A particularly savvy politician, Helen Clark was reflecting a shift in both political and popular discourse on sustainability and also, especially, on climate change. More than five years ago, Demeritt commented that, “In little more than a decade, global warming has been transformed from an obscure technical concern into a subject of widespread public concern and international regulatory interest” (2001, p. 307). Now, helped perhaps by public awareness spurred by media interest in former Vice President Al Gore’s Oscar-winning documentary, An Inconvenient Truth, the situation appears to be even more acute. The issue of climate change and its impacts may now have reached one of Breakwell and Barnett’s “critical points”. Although they are talking about risk events, when particular occurrences make possible harm actual, their description seems apposite:

Specifically, critical points are phases of varying lengths of time when the orientation, tempo or strength of the social image of a hazard changes significantly. Self interest, moral outrage and the arousal of fear are identified as principles that are instrumental in leading to an event achieving critical point status (2001, p. 9).

Arguably climate change debates illustrate all of these principles. Countries as well as corporations express reservations about what a commitment to reducing their contribution to greenhouse gas emissions would mean to their economies. Australian Prime Minister John Howard has said that while there is undeniable evidence that the climate is changing, “…the answer is not knee-jerk responses that harm the national interest” (PM says carbon trading, 2007). Activists and affected citizens alike articulate outrage over perceived inaction, or inadequate action, of governments and corporations in relation to climate issues. Fear both for the future of the planetary physical environment and for wellbeing at a localised level is a feature of climate change discourse. In Australia, the world’s driest inhabited continent, these strands come together as drought affected farmers and townspeople not only express grave fears for their
future livelihoods but also blame governments for not doing enough to “drought-proof” their
district. It is not only farmers who suffer (the archetypal picture of climate change impact in
Australia is parched pasture) but also those whose livelihoods depend in some way on the land.
In one town in Victoria, Australia – Leongatha -- more than 400 jobs at a dairy factory were
threatened when the local dam’s water supply dropped to 15 per cent of capacity, provoking
anguished appraisals not only of how to handle the immediate crisis but also of how to ensure it
was not repeated. A survey showed not only that access to water was the top issue for locals but
also “a strong sense of frustration that the relevant authorities have failed to plan for Leongatha’s
water needs” (*Water tops real need*, 2007).

This paper is an initial exploration of how public relations could choose to involve itself
in the way such climate issues are handled at a local level. Phenomena such as drought are
“glocal” (*A Dictionary of Sociology*, “glocalization”, 2005) questions negotiated at international
and national as well as at regional levels; here the wider considerations are excluded for reasons
of scope. A particular geographic community may not be able to influence policymaking in
national or international for a – but it can seek to affect how risks seen as related to climate
change are handled locally. In Australia, although some voices argue that the unprecedented
drought affecting large parts of the country is at least partly due to a change in the natural cycle
of wet and dry conditions, there seems to be discursive closure around the idea that much of the
problem results from global climate change.

**Framing risk**

We seek to connect public relations with this issue for several reasons. One is that
whether public relations professionals are involved or not (and they are not, always)
corporations, governments and lobby groups use public relations techniques such as media
relations and government relations to frame debates including those centered on risk questions
such as climate change. As climate change is now assuming a prominent position in public
agendas, it is appropriate to note the role of public relations in this framing. One does not need to
delve into allegations of corporate funding of climate change deniers (Monbiot, 2006) to do this:
framing issues is business-as-usual both for PR practitioners and those who seek to draw from
the public relations toolkit. For example, in Toowoomba, Australia’s second largest inland city,
the council launched a “new Toowoomba Water Futures initiative” to include “construction of a
best practice advanced water treatment plant to provide a reusable water source” (*Toowoomba
Water Futures Project*, 2005). The council’s media release did not mention that the water to be
treated would be sewage effluent. The public relations role may extend beyond persuasive
communication to programmed stakeholder dialogue and engagement designed to blunt criticism
of social and environmental actions (Burchell & Cook, 2006). Such a brief would be consistent
with the positioning of public relations as a boundary-spanning function helping manage the
interface between the organization and the community. This kind of interaction may be
undertaken as a form of risk management aimed at diminishing the “social risk” of negative
campaigns by stakeholders driven by environmental concerns (Joyce & Thomson, 2000).
According to Burchell and Cook, “Arguably the reduction of risk is a major driving force behind
companies seeking to engage more directly with stakeholders through processes of dialogue”
(2006, p.224). However, attempts to draw the sting of citizen ire from contentious debates will
fail if their “risk management” rationale is organization-centered and is not founded on an
understanding of the dynamics of the community concerned.
Often it is the risk-generators – organizations seen as being “part of the problem” in terms of their perceived contribution to climate change – that deploy public relations to either protect existing industrial practices or mitigate constraints on them. For example, mining industries are active in implementing programs designed to establish and maintain their “social licence to operate” through building social acceptability for their operations. Australian Prime Minister Howard has promised to look after them: “We are not going to sell out the thousands of workers in the mining and power generation industries” (PM says carbon trading, 2007).

Given the claimed consequences to humankind of not moving urgently to moderate its contribution to climate change (Stern Review, 2006; IPCC, 2007) citizens may call into question the ethics of PR activity by any industry perceived to be delaying or deterring appropriate action -- and industries which may be moving to mitigate their environmental impact may also vigorously defend the progress they are making. Contestation over risk assessments, optimum management strategy and attributions of blame and responsibility are a common feature of risk debates, including those that are fought locally.

In Toowoomba, a referendum was called for on the question of whether to add treated effluent to the city’s drinking water. The council held more than 160 public forums, ran an advertising campaign and organised taste tests of water that had been through the treatment processes proposed. Its “yes” case was buttressed by sound science arguments, affirmed by Councillor Michelle Alroe, who stated on a city website that, “I have looked at the research and I thoroughly trust the science, which is the foundation of our Water Futures Toowoomba project” (Why we’re voting YES, 2006). On the same website, Councillor Michelle Schneider commented:

Opponent's (sic) claims regarding the health implications of water recycling is (sic) just scaremongering. Wherever recycled water is used, strict Health Department guidelines for water quality and management must be met. It is highly treated recycled water that has been strongly endorsed as a safe source of water.

I am appalled by the conspiracy theories, the political agendas and the misinformation surrounding the issue. The issue is water, and our lack of it. Are the people who are against Water Futures able to give the community a viable option? (Why we’re voting YES, 2007).

The ‘no’ campaign was led by citizens who argued memorably that if the referendum resulted in endorsement of the council’s plans, the city would become known as “Poowoomba” (www.poowoomba.com). The face-off was summarised in a radio interview on the day of the poll with Malcolm Turnbull, then the Prime Minister’s Parliamentary Secretary for Water and since appointed federal Minister for the Environment and Water Resources:

LISA MILLAR: What have you thought about the quality of the debate going on in Toowoomba over the last few weeks?
MALCOLM TURNBULL: I think the no case has obviously been a scare campaign. It's been based more on emotion rather than science.
LISA MILLAR: And the people who say "Poowoomba" - they're drinking sewage - what do you say to them?
MALCOLM TURNBULL: Well nobody's drinking sewage. The water that will be produced from this process, as I said, will be purer than the water in Toowoomba's dams today. So drinking sewage is nonsense, that's ridiculous.
I mean, this Poowoomba thing is ludicrous, it's childish. And it's only being promoted by those people on the no side.
(Poowoomba: Turnbull supports treated sewage water, 2006).
There was an economic argument, too: former mayor Clive Berghofer claimed that, "The perception our water will be 25% recycled sewage is already doing harm. People won't want to come here, others will leave. Property values will drop and jobs will go."

The referendum resulted in a resounding defeat for the “yes” camp, with nearly 62 per cent of voters giving the water recycling proposal the thumbs-down. The debate and its outcome illustrate the perils of constructing persuasive communication campaigns. In a confrontation between different groups each claiming a rational foundation for their case, laypeople may well call for a plague on both houses, as

when the issue is precisely the competing factual claims of differing experts, nonexperts can hardly be expected to judge the scientific facts for themselves. Instead, they base their judgments about environmental risks on both the perceived credibility of the scientists in question and wider criteria about the kind of social and political commitments those risks involve (Jasanoff and Wynne, 1998) (Demeritt, 2001, p. 329).

It is not a matter merely of objective analysis facing off against emotional responses: as Demeritt points out, the cultural politics of scientific practice play a part in framing “and in that sense, constructing for us the problem of global warming” (2001, p. 308). The Toowoomba water fight illustrates that when a community is faced with a significant risk question to decide, people cluster into interest groups which, under pressure, tend to present differences as more significant than an outsider might judge them to be, and which use public relations techniques to advance their viewpoint.

The result can be a deterioration in the social (and the economic) fabric of the community as position-taking deepens into social divides and community development becomes a matter of repair rather than growth. However, such an outcome need not be a given if public relations practitioners and those who deploy PR techniques are willing to recognise that “post-normal” conditions call for responses that move outside familiar boundaries. By way of analogy, in the field of food quality, it has been argued that issues including purity, safety and ethics can no longer be resolved through normal science; rather, a new sort of “post-normal” science is required (Ravetz, 2002). In Australia, and arguably elsewhere too, normal approaches are no longer sufficient when considering how to handle climate change impacts a drought considered to be the worst in over 100 years (Farm exports to be hit by 100-year drought, 2006). If that contention holds, then public relations people who seek to legitimize organizations and their behavior through “community relations” programs may need to do more. Such programs, designed or maintained in order to maintain a “social license to operate” (Nelson & Scoble, 2006) seek to build social acceptability and allay fears about perceived risks associated with corporate operations through tactics such as providing information, opportunities to visit industrial plants and consultation with organizational leaders. However, their focus may be on the short-term rather than on confronting the social concerns associated with a long-run risk such as climate change, whose impacts may be felt over decades or more.

In economics, a long-run risk is a source of uncertainty that produces low frequency fluctuations whose volatility is almost negligible over a short time horizon but is larger over longer horizons (Croce, 2006). For an issue of this order, organizational responses need to be scaled up to more closely match the size of the threat. This may mean extending community relations programs into community development – helping to deal not only with the dilemmas of the present day but also strengthening the ability of the community to handle major risk in future. It is not sufficient simply to assume that the company knows what the community wants. In
discussing “the community” we mean those people resident in a particular geographic area; in talking about “community” (without the definite article) we have in mind such sense as those residents may have of being connected together through communication networks.

Like ‘risk’, ‘community’ is a malleable term open to a wide range of interpretations, as Kruckeberg & Starck point out:

The meaning of “community” has been devalued, defaced, disfigured – mugged, if you will – to the point that the word, itself, has been rendered almost useless. Of course, the concept remains functional if only because – like a Rorschach inkblot – it enables us to project our own sense of meaning onto the term (2000, p. 2).

Community is a highly contested concept and multiple discourses attest to the positioning of community across a spectrum from coopted agent of government and tool of business organizations, to perspectives that demonstrate respect for the need and capacity of communities to exercise their own agency (Everingham 2002, Lynn, 2006). Hallahan describes community as “one of the murkiest concepts in the social sciences and humanities” (2004, p.234), defining it himself as “any group that shares common interests developed through common experience” (2004, p. 243). There is also communitas which denotes intense feelings of social togetherness and belonging (Anthrobase.com), a spirit to which Kruckeberg & Starck referred when they argued that public relations “is best defined as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community” (1988, p. xi). Only in this way, they asserted, could public relations fully participate in society’s “information and communication milieu” (p.xi). They saw the public relations practitioner’s brief as wider than being a communicator. It should, they held, include “seeking out and promoting discourse along all avenues”, an activity “which can help to build a sense of community among organizations and their geographic publics” (1988, p. 112).

According to Kruckeberg & Starck, public relations practice exists because of a loss of this sense, resulting from the social effects of new means of communication and transportation. Therefore, they propose, “community-building must be regarded as the highest calling of public relations practice” – and as the best way to serve society as well as its organizations (2000, p. 4). However, it must be asked to what extent the pursuit of this high calling can proceed in “post-normal” conditions when the economic survival of a community is at risk. Kruckeberg & Starck acknowledge that discussion of contemporary community-building raises “a host of issues”, especially that community work engaged in by public relations practitioners on behalf of what are seen to be vested corporate interests (2000, p.6) – a point to be discussed below. They identify eight ways in which, they suggest, practitioners could “restore and maintain a sense of community in their organizations and among stakeholders/publics” (2000, p.9, referring to their 1988 work, pp. 112-117). The first of the eight is particularly relevant to the present discussion: “Practitioners can help community members and the organizations they represent become conscious of common interests that are the basis for both their contentions and their solutions” (2000, p. 9).

In a paper that encompasses an extensive literature review, Hallahan makes a similar case, contending that the field of public relations “might be better called “community relations” (2004, p. 233). His argument for the community as the theoretical foundation for public relations theory and practice rests on four foundations: the pervasiveness of the community idea and ideal in everyday life and contemporary scholarship; conceptual imitations of the focus on publics in public relations; the rise of community-related theories in public relations scholarship and “the strength of community-building as a philosophy to drive public relations practice” (2004, p.233). He notes that other scholars have followed Kruckeberg & Starck’s lead, with the two most
explicit arguments advanced revolving around the ideas of strategic co-operative communities and of communitarianism.

According to Hallahan, Wilson (1996) held that building community requires corporations to possess long-range vision, a sincere commitment to community service, not just profit; organizational values that reflect the importance of people; cooperative problem solving and empowerment and a relationship-building approach to public relations. Wilson envisaged a genuinely co-operative, non-exploitative relationship between organizations and the community. Two of his colleagues, Rawlins & Stoker, averring that organizations have become detached through callous exploitation of communities, made a case for genuine community that included promoting autonomy and independence among community members and a willingness to sacrifice self-interests to promote the community’s ideals and values (2001, n.d., in Hallahan, 2004, p. 251). Hallahan also traverses the scholarship that suggests communitarianism is a community-based approach relevant to public relations theory and practice and the work of others who propose symmetric, dialogic and transactional approaches to community (2004, p. 252).

According to Hallahan, community-building involves “the integration of people and the organizations they create into a functional collectivity that strives toward common or compatible goals.” (2004, p. 259). He contends that community building “redirects public relations’ focus away from its institutional focus and slavish emphasis on achieving organizational goals to address community citizenship” (2004, p. 259), squares with the idea of public relations as having to do with the building and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships and moves public relations from an emphasis on control “to the two fundamental functions that public relations performs: providing counsel about community interests and facilitating communication” (2004, p. 259).

Hallahan’s prescription for organizational community-building is three-fold: community involvement, community nurturing and community organizing. Community involvement has to do with PR practitioners facilitating an organization or cause-related group’s participation in an existing community, including taking part in discussions and dialogue. Nurturing goes further, to “fostering the economic, political, social, and cultural vitality of communities in which people and organizations or causes are members” (2004, p. 261), while community organizing involves the grassroots creation of new communities among disparate individuals with common interests. Hallahan’s examples of community nurturing include sponsorship, volunteerism, and philanthropy (2004, p. 261), while community organizing might see public relations approaches used to improve economic or social conditions in a particular neighbourhood or for members of a particular minority group. He notes that while “community shifts the organizational emphasis from the cold treatment of impersonal, often adversarial publics, to a warmer, more enlightened emphasis on collaboration and cooperation with others” (2004, p. 264) this does not mean that organizations will necessarily act more responsibly or ethically. Indeed, creating communities that communicate effectively does not imply an ideal consensus (2004, p. 263).

Heath advances a “fully functioning society theory of public relations” (FST) (2006, p. x). He notes that critics often claim that public relations inherently works against a fully functioning society because of a penchant for deception and various “base acts” that work against the public interest. He points out that organizations have replaced single individuals in the citizenship roles needed for a fully functioning society. These organizations engage in robust combat, dialogue and hegemony to influence agendas, to put facts and values into play and to frame arguments. At its worst, he says, the role is to propagandize. At their best, these
organizations employ tactics to increase awareness and attract others – whether followers, supporters or customers – to participate in a co-ordinated enactment based on shared meaning, that leads to and results from enlightened choice.

In Heath’s view, public relations best serves society and the organizations that help form it by putting into place this shared meaning, which he suggests should be involved in listening to people, resolving conflicts, fostering dialogue and taking part in collective decision-making. Heath suggests that public relations’ future may rest with attention focused on the good of society instead of the communicator or organization. He notes humans are “collectivist animals” who work out individual and collective interests through the creation of shared meaning in communication and decision making infrastructures. Improving these infrastructures “requires insights into community as a geographic and mental context in which collaboration can be ideal” (p.x). Risk is one aspect of community that requires this insight: citing Douglas (1992) Heath notes that society occurs for the collective management of risks as the generation and distribution of resources.

His exposition of the fully functioning society theory of public relations is worth quoting in detail:

The FST of public relations postulates that individuals (individually and collectively) seek to make rewarding decisions in the face of risks posed by uncertainties that require enlightened decision making by obtaining information (facts), opinions, and policy recommendations from various sources (in varying degrees of collaborative decision making and dialogue) that are variously trusted as legitimate participants in the community infrastructure to foster mutually beneficial relationships through balancing systems, responsibly using control and power to the advantage of the community, cocreating meaning as shared narratives and identifications, and through meeting of normative social exchange expectations.

This theory presumes that individuals, qua individuals and in collectivities, are confronted with a reality fraught with chaos, entropy, and turbulence to which they wish to bring order through enlightened decision making. To do so requires shared meaning that rests on interpretations of information, weighing of values, and consideration of policy. Broadly, these choices are traditionally addressed through publicity and promotion as well as in contests over issues, responses to crises, and discussions of risk management (2006, p. 99).

Heath notes that to achieve a fully functioning society, corporate responsibility initiatives “must entail choices and actions that go well beyond the organization’s narrow self-interest” (2006, p. 103). We argue that this “beyond” could include working to strengthen the community’s own ability to handle major risk such as extended drought in the future, to help develop community resilience and thereby build reputational capital as the same time as “social capital” is increased. “Social capital” is another murky concept. According to Harper there is consensus around a definition that emphasizes the role of networks and civic norms while “research undoubtedly correlates high social capital, in the form of social trust and associational networks, with a multiplicity of desirable policy outcomes” (2001, p.6). Strengthening these networks may not be part of conventional community relations programs – but doing so may enhance community resilience and self-efficacy in confronting long-term risks.

By community resilience, we have in mind the definition of the UN’s International Strategy for Disaster Reduction:
The capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazards to adapt, by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure. This is determined by the degree to which the social system is capable of organizing itself to increase its capacity for learning from past disasters for better future protection and to improve risk reduction measures. (http://www.unisdr.org/eng/library/lib-terminology-eng%20home.htm)

Community development (CD) claims this community capacity-building as its own province. CD claims to be a field of practice founded on principles such as social justice, equity, human rights and both ecological and social sustainability (Ife 2002, Ife and Tesoriero 2006). Community development is, however, tough to define. Brennan notes that, “There is an inconsistency in the definition, usage, and general understanding of what community development represents” (2004, p.1). He names several conceptualizations, such as the following: Community development is about purposive activity designed to alter local conditions in a positive way; about pursuing specific projects with an emphasis on building social relationships and communication networks and about community residents working together to address common issues (cf. 2004, p. 2). The power imbalance between decision-makers and those for whom decisions are made is always significant, if not central in CD; however, this does not imply a single discourse or an assumption that communities hold a single view of the common good (Little 2002).

While public relations may operate in self-interested, self-advantaging ways (Moloney, 2006) community development’s modus operandi includes challenging established interests whose activities may not square with what is good for the community. Notwithstanding presuppositional and other differences, in the context of our discussion – in communities grappling with climate-related risk questions – public relations and community development specialists can, we believe, form productive partnerships. Such partnerships need to be founded on a recognition of the mutual gains available from collaboration in a post-normal situation. Public relations is unlikely to escape its brief to serve the interests of those who retain its services, and community development is likely to retain its inherent suspicion of both PR and its masters. However, both can benefit the other. Public relations may well have access to organizational resources of money, media access, personnel and political connections beyond the reach of community development practitioners. Equally, CD people know how to access the “invisible colleges”, the fundamental networks of communication and relationship that are essential strands in any community’s dynamic. Public relations may be in a position to enable some unheard voices to find a forum. CD may be able to help PR make connections otherwise not available to it because of suspicion of corporate motives.

Even acknowledging that neither field can claim to have a mortgage on morality, the contention that they can work together challenges conventional notions of professional identity. On this basis, our argument may be seen as idealised. Yet an idealised approach can stimulate intellectual inquiry, as in the public relations literature, James Grunig did with his symmetrical communication research, and serve as a model for new forms of organizational-community interaction. Such new forms, we suggest, could be based on public relations and community development professionals collaborating in strategy-building on risk issues. Such collaboration need not be motivated by more than enlightened self-interest. A PR practitioner may see community development as offering a useful albeit longer term approach to achieving the client’s desired outcome, which might, perhaps, be community support for radical water conservation measures such as the phased introduction of recycled effluent to drinking water
supplies. A community development practitioner may see collaboration with public relations as a means of influencing an organizational agenda and of eliciting tangible support for measures to enhance community risk-resilience.

For both professions, the rationale for collaboration is the proposal that communities facing significant risk such as a one-in-a-hundred-year drought will look not only for answers to the substantive risk issue but also to the need to strengthen their resilience in coping with such matters, both immediately and in the future. They may valorize social cohesion over economic outcomes, or view the risk scenario they confront as providing an opportunity to strengthen social cohesion in ways that may, or may not, align with public relations campaign objectives. In effect, it is possible for public relations to become hoist with the petard of community priorities, with a community development focus.

However, in our view, a dualistic opposition between public relations and community development need neither exist nor stand in the way of communities finding viable approaches to the risk dilemmas they face, such as – in Australia – the local impacts of drought and diminishing or fragile water supplies. Our contention takes into account the work of critical public relations studies such as those by Mackey, who talks of scholars who “write from the perspective of a preferred world view where organizations always use public relations to “serve” communities – never to exploit populations or to extract advantage from those less organised and less resourced” (2003, p.4). Mackey’s favored “take” on public relations aligns with that of Leitch and Neilson (1997), who highlight the question of power relationships inherent in PR interactions. He paraphrases their argument as opposing “suggestions that public relations can always be a disinterested, power-neutral activity even if it is supposedly practised ‘symmetrically’ or along some other professional-ethical guideline” (2003, p. 5).

If Mackey and others are right, public relations can never escape the coils of self-interest as it works on behalf of the resource-rich to persuade publics that the status quo is the natural order of things. Such a public relations practice would discard the idea of “corporate community investment” – defined as “business involvement in social initiatives to meet the needs of the communities in which they operate” (Moon & Muthuri, 2006) – as failing to offer direct bottom-line benefit. Our response to such a position is that it is not necessary for PR to pretend to a nobility of motive it may not possess. What is necessary is for it to interpret the means of advancing that interest differently. Investing in community development can help achieve some key PR goals: enhancing legitimacy and creating more sustainable reputational capital. In this way, PR can fulfil the vision of making a contribution to community-building, but do so on a foundation of better access to community networks and more authentic partnerships that might otherwise be the case.

References


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