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Article:

Edwards, L (2018) Public relations, voice and recognition: a case study. *Media, Culture and Society*, 40 (3). pp. 317-332. ISSN 0163-4437

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443717705000>

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Public relations, voice and recognition: A case study**Lee Edwards, University of Leeds**

Accepted version for publication, January 2017

Abstract

Public relations' role in democracy is most often conceptualised as a distortion of public debate through the intrusion of vested interests in the public sphere. In this paper, an alternative view of public relations is proposed, grounded in the work of Silverstone, Couldry and Honneth, as a tool through which spaces of appearance may be constructed for individuals within deliberative systems. The results of a pilot study conducted with one UK charity are presented, to explore how the use of public relations by marginalised young people allowed them to express voice, receive recognition and engage with others as citizens. The paper concludes with a consideration of the limitations of the study and its implications for the role of public relations in democracy.

Keywords

Public relations, voice, recognition, mediapolis, Couldry, Honneth, deliberative systems, youth, democracy

Public relations, voice and recognition: A case study

Public relations is a promotional industry defined by a strategic approach to communication, incorporating a range of online and offline techniques that enable organisations to communicate to audiences in a way that serves their interests. Because its work contravenes the parameters for Habermasian approaches to deliberative democracy, it is usually critiqued by democratic theorists as instrumental communication that distorts the media agenda; through which vested interests are able to intervene in debates about the public interest; and through which the ideological hegemony of markets, individualism and consumerism are sustained (Davis, 2013; Habermas, 1989; Lewis et al., 2008; Marchand, 1998; Michie, 1998; Miller and Dinan, 2007; Roper, 2005). However, an alternative view is to understand public relations as an element in deliberative systems (Dryzek, 2009), with a varied and sometimes more positive role in deliberation (AUTHOR REMOVED, 2016). Deliberative systems theory opens up the permissible space for deliberation by arguing that political talk emerges in a variety of forms and spaces across society, and that this variety should be incorporated into accounts of how deliberative encounters are constituted in our daily lives (Dryzek, 2009; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Parkinson, 2004).

Deliberative systems theory allows some of the more productive forms of public relations to be incorporated into models of deliberative democracy (AUTHOR REMOVED, 2016). For example, when used in the service of social action, public relations campaigns can facilitate voice that, under conditions of effective listening, generates recognition for individuals and groups as actors making a valid contribution to society (Hodges and McGrath, 2011; Hodges et al., 2014; Hon, 1997; Somerville and Aroussi, 2013; Titley, 2012; Weaver, 2014). In this paper, I suggest that, within deliberative systems, public relations can act as a tool through

which ‘spaces of appearance’ can be constructed, voice enacted and listening prompted in deliberative encounters that add to the quality of democracy. I argue that situating public relations work in the context of the mediapolis, as an activity that individuals as well as organisations might engage in, offers greater flexibility for exploring this additional dimension of public relations work.

To illustrate the argument, the results of a pilot study conducted with a UK charity, YouthVoice¹, are reported. YouthVoice helps young people conduct public relations campaigns about issues that they want to speak out about. The charity casts public relations as a form of social action in itself, because it facilitates voice for campaigners (the term ‘voice’ is widely used by YouthVoice staff). Individual campaigners’ experiences with YouthVoice are explored, to elicit how their lives and narratives of the world are made visible to, and demand attention from, others. Following the presentation of the empirical analysis, the paper concludes with a reflection on the implications of the study for our understanding of public relations’ democratic contribution.

Spaces of appearance, the mediapolis and public relations

In democratic environments, the media are fundamental to processes of representation, self-representation and connection between people. Silverstone (2006) for example, argues:

‘it is because the media provide [...] the frameworks (or frameworlds) for the appearance of the other that they, de facto, define the moral space within which the other appears to us, and at the same time invite (claim, constrain) an equivalent moral response from us, the audience, as a potential or actual citizen.’ (2006: 7).

What Silverstone calls the mediapolis, 'the space of mediated appearance' (2006: 31), creates connections between human beings, producing a recognition of plurality and the 'possibility of public life and political action' (p. 35). The mediapolis is a political and agentic space of appearance in the Arendtian sense, the 'space between the familiar and the strange, myself and the other' (Silverstone, 2006: 35), offering the possibility of both connection and separation. While media 'enable the stretching of action beyond the face-to-face', they simultaneously 'undermine the expectation of responsibility and reciprocity that action and communication in face-to-face settings conventionally require. Technologies disconnect as well as connect.' (p. 11). The mediapolis, in other words, is a complex part of our everyday lives, connecting us online and offline, but where the outcomes of connection are not guaranteed.

Because public relations works through online and offline media, it is implicated in the spaces of mediated appearance that make up the mediapolis. In addition, public relations tactics often address audiences directly through social media, events, viral videos, and grass-roots community relations work. The variety of channels means public relations can mediate spaces of appearance both independently of, and in conjunction with, the media. Moreover, while it is used most often by organisations, public relations techniques are increasingly familiar and accessible for individuals to use as a means of acting politically. In these contexts, its work can be best understood in terms of voice and listening in the context of political engagement.

The political importance of voice and listening

The mediapolis is the location where the inseparable nature of media and voice – as a political articulation of citizenship - becomes visible (Couldry, 2008; 2010). According to

Couldry, media systems ‘intensively represent (symbolize) the boundaries of political representation’ (2008: 4). They are implicated in the production and circulation of neoliberal values that shut down voice, and in the opportunities that marginalised communities have to exercise voice and be heard by those in power (Dreher, 2009, 2012; Sun, 2012; Svensson, 2014). The importance of voice is based on the basic principle that humans are self-interpreting beings and, correspondingly, our capacity for narrative is non-negotiable. By extension, having resources to enact voice is a fundamental human right, since they help us to realise our narrative identity and express our view of the world in reflexive dialogue with others.

Couldry (2010) distinguishes between two types of voice. Voice as process is our ‘distinctive perspective on the world that needs to be acknowledged’ (2010: 1), an embodied expression of how we find the world as it is and how we might want it to change. Voice as process has the potential to constitute civic communication, but need not always be defined by a civic purpose. In contrast, voice as value addresses the institutional arrangements that enable the articulation of voice to be heard. It ‘involves particular attention to the conditions under which voice as a process is effective, and how broader forms of organisation may subtly undermine or devalue voice as process’ (Couldry, 2010: 2). It follows that acquiring effective voice is only possible where the social and political systems that structure our lives – manifest through the institutions and organisations with which we interact - genuinely value our unique narrations of the world.

This conceptualisation of voice explicitly acknowledges the political importance of listening, since the extent to which voice is valued is reflected not only in opportunities to speak, but also in the quality of listening that takes place (Bickford, 1996; Couldry, 2009; Dreher, 2010;

Macnamara, 2013). Speaking and listening are inseparable and mutually constitutive parts of voice. As Lacey notes, ‘without a listener, speech is nothing but noise in the ether; more to the point, without a listener there would be no reason, no calling to speak’ (2011: 12). The enactment of voice is at once individual and collective. Speech can only be enacted by one actor (though multiple people may speak simultaneously), but listening is always dispersed across audiences, who may or may not share physical space and respond with speech, but who always have the potential to speak (Lacey, 2011). Online, for example, ‘speech’ (in the form of tweets, videos or facebook posts, for example) may be motivated by the possibility of a response, while listening may be partial and fragmented, not necessarily evidenced by reciprocal ‘speaking’ (Crawford, 2009). Bickford (1996: 125) notes that ‘[a]s a political actor [...] I require from others an attentiveness to what I do with them, a listening and a looking flexible enough to perceive my activity.’ Correspondingly, the degree to which speech resonates across space and time, online or offline, depends on the existence of active, responsive listening, or ‘freedom of listening’ - ‘a normative ideal that encompasses not only a right to listen in, but a responsibility to listen out’ (Lacey, 2011: 15).

Voice, characterised by openness and reflexivity in both speaking and listening, allows us to better understand our own life as well as others’ experiences. It is also a political act, a means of contesting existing norms and challenging patterns of discursive and material authority from a particular point of view (Sun, 2012). Voice emerges in the mediapolis as simultaneous possibilities of connection and separation between people and organisations who wish to act politically by engaging as citizens in mediated spaces of appearance. That said, there is a danger in being too celebratory about voice: in practice, the proliferation of opportunities to speak thanks to online technologies does not guarantee freedom of listening (Couldry, 2010; Dreher, 2012; Lacey, 2011).

The media have a powerful bearing whose voices appear to be valued in society, and their capacity to transmit and circulate voices across deliberative systems introduces the possibility that spaces for democratic engagement could expand and a collective form of voice could emerge, with a more powerful capacity to intervene in policymaking. Alongside media, corporate organisations and governments are also implicated in valuing and transmitting voice through their public relations work. They have the capacity not only to speak as a corporate ‘person’, but also to enact politicised forms of listening that actively engage with difference rather than only passively celebrating voice (Crawford, 2009; Dreher, 2009, 2012; Macnamara, 2013). This kind of listening is strategic – an active search for both difference and commonality - and its outcomes translate to our ability to live alongside each other, to shrink the ‘stretched’ mediated world that Silverstone (2006) describes, to the more human scale of our quotidian experiences.

Public relations, voice and recognition

Normative models of public relations position dialogue and engagement at the heart of public relations (see, e.g. Grunig, 2001; Heath, 2001; Taylor and Kent, 2014), but these ideals are rarely realised – most organisations do not pursue dialogue or reflexivity through their communication, and many try to silence opposition (Davis, 2002, 2013; Kent, 2013; L'Etang and Pieczka, 2006; Moloney, 2006; Pieczka, 2011; Roper, 2011; Weaver and Motion, 2002). Arguably, the political-economic and symbolic distortions of voice that public relations perpetuates reflect its role as one of neoliberalism’s ‘elaborate structures’ (Couldry, 2010: 24), regulating market functioning by reifying consumption and choice while simultaneously minimising the risk of audiences not cooperating with organisational objectives. This critique notwithstanding, public relations used for social action also has the potential to facilitate

voice and in this capacity, it can contribute to the vitality of deliberative systems. It represents a resource for voice as process, adding a strategic dimension to the use of communicative artefacts – online and offline texts, films and videos, posters, events - through which narratives can be constructed in ways that enhance their visibility. It also helps to realise voice as value when used to create ‘spaces of appearance’ for marginalised groups and prompt active, responsive listening on the part of organisations (AUTHOR REMOVED, 2016).

Social action is usually designed to make a tangible, material difference to people’s lives, but it can also incorporate the potentially transformational effect of voice as a means of meeting our need for recognition (Honneth, 1996). On an individual level, recognition emerges in the context of one-to-one relationships, where unconditional acceptance of the other generates self-confidence enough to venture further into other social contexts. At the ‘rights’ level of recognition, collective recognition of an individual is expressed through legally guaranteed civil, political and social rights, that confirm the individual as a ‘morally responsible person [with]... the qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible’ (Honneth, 1996: 120). This level of recognition is fundamental to self-respect and the belief in one’s status as a citizen. Finally, the solidarity level of recognition refers to the ‘social esteem that allows [individuals] to relate positively to their concrete traits and abilities’ (p. 121). It is constantly negotiated during struggles over the definition of societal norms, values and goals, and the role played by different subjectivities in realising them.

If voice is effective, individuals learn to distinguish different relations between themselves and others, and recognise their own responsibilities as members of society (Honneth, 1996). It follows that appearing to others by enacting voice simultaneously involves recognition and

correspondingly, public relations that facilitates voice also facilitates recognition. Public relations has supported powerful interventions in civic and political debates, helping to secure equal rights for women, reduce racial discrimination, highlight violence against women as a social (rather than private) problem, and improve workers' rights, among many other causes (Demetriou, 2013; Dutta, 2011; Heath and Waymer, 2009; McWilliams, 1995; Straughan, 2004; Weaver, 2014). Such campaigns bring forth the realities of life at the periphery of society into spaces of appearance where they can be recognised by others. They help to preserve plurality, by delivering rights- and solidarity-level recognition for different groups, as well as demanding active, politicised listening as part of dialogue and debate.

While research has established the democratic contribution of public relations in the context of organisational activism, its effect on individual experiences of voice and recognition remains unexplored. In the analysis that follows, I explore how young people's use of public relations produces an experience of voice as value (Couldry, 2010) through their engagement with speaking, listening and recognition. A description of the case and methods is given next, before the results of the analysis are presented.

The case organisation: YouthVoice

YouthVoice helps young people (16-25 years old) from across the UK to develop communication campaigns about issues that concern them (eg. homelessness, disability, eating disorders, teen suicide). At the heart of YouthVoice's work is a belief in the transformational potential of communication and the importance of giving voice to young people as a route to building healthier and more cohesive communities. The majority of campaigners are from marginalised groups and personal experiences form the basis of the campaigns they run. These generate substantial media coverage and provide a platform from

which campaigners can engage with community institutions and decision makers (police, MPs, councillors, schools) to create material change.

Campaigners are recruited via a Young Person's Coordinator (YPC), who visits local organisations (e.g. schools, youth clubs, community groups) to invite young people to participate. Those who want to do a campaign contact the YPC with an idea, which is discussed and refined during a series of meetings (the **planning phase**). Many of the campaigners are not used to speaking publically, so this phase is an important period of development where they begin to discover their own voice as a 'speaking subject' (Coleman, 2013). The discovery is physical as well as psychological: one participant described how he was largely silent when he first met his YPC, but by the time he started with filming he 'couldn't stop talking'.

A lead campaigner emerges through the planning phase, with a team of friends supporting the project. The YPC's focus is on what the campaigners want to say, preserving their voice in the campaign. However, to make a campaign effective the focus has to be specific rather than general (e.g. 'how having autism affects schooling' rather than 'all about autism'), so campaigners are encouraged to strategise about their communication, developing clear and precise messages. Once the objective and message of the campaign is clear, the campaigners meet with their YPC and the YouthVoice creative team to discuss the content and format of the core campaign resource in more detail (the **creative phase**). The resource is created collaboratively between the YouthVoice creative team (who have the skills and technical ability to create what the campaigner wants) and the campaigning team (who own the 'narrative' or story around which the resource is created). During this time, the campaigner

establishes connections with local organisations that can help (e.g. by providing content or distributing the resource to their online and offline contacts) (the **engagement phase**).

The finished resource is always presented to an invited audience (the **launch phase**). The presentation and discussion gives campaigners visibility among people who are able to facilitate change and a sense of how impactful their messages are. Local and regional journalists are generally invited to this event as well. Following the launch the resource is circulated widely through digital channels run by the campaigners themselves, as well as through YouthVoice's website and social media networks (the **dissemination phase**). Some campaigns are selected for coverage on regional news programmes, in which case a broadcast-ready film about the campaign is made by the YouthVoice broadcast team. If a campaign merits attention from the national media, or justifies an approach to local or national government (e.g. councillors, policymakers or MPs), then the YouthVoice communications team will lead that initiative with the agreement of the campaigner. Media engagement and public affairs work is fronted by the campaigners so that they retain control over their message and voice. Many campaigns spark new or related initiatives, but at that stage YouthVoice withdraws from the formal support process.

Methods

For this pilot study, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with YouthVoice's CEO (Maria Hepworth), Head of Communications (Gabrielle Solder) and five young people who had completed campaigns using social media, online videos, websites or other digital communication channels. They were emailed an invitation to participate by Gabrielle Solder. The selection of campaigners was purposive insofar as their campaigns had all been launched successfully and well-received by their target audiences. It is not possible to generalise from

their cases, but they provide an important insight into how public relations campaigns could create spaces for the development of voice as value. The invitation email gave them an overview of the study, explained why they were being invited to participate and confirmed anonymity and confidentiality. They were then contacted directly by the researcher to arrange an interview.

The five campaigners were very familiar with digital communication and actively used social media (mainly Twitter and Facebook). They had all experienced some kind of marginalisation prior to their campaign based on their health, age, class or social circumstance. Three of the five (Mary, Theo and Ed) had already started informally publicizing initiatives related to their interests via social media and local media before they worked with YouthVoice, and discussed their campaigns in ways that showed a certain degree of confidence in their own voice, as well as an understanding of key public relations concepts such as audiences, tailoring channels and messages, and making communication appealing and engaging. For them, the notion of speaking was intimately related to encouraging the right kind of listening among the people they wanted to reach. The other two participants had never used communication instrumentally in a public arena; their experiences in the different phases of campaign development illustrated the ways in which they discovered voice as both speaking and listening.

The interviews with campaigners explored the rationale and purpose of their campaigns, and their experiences through the different phases of campaign development and launch. The interviews with the CEO and Head of Communications explored the ethos and purpose of the organisation, the campaign development process, and more general issues relating to funding

and policy intervention. Interviews took place at a location convenient for each participant and lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours.

Table 1 shows the topic, core resource and content strategy for each campaign. In two cases, a more factually-oriented style of information dissemination was adopted; in the remainder, the focus was on articulating a personal story to illustrate the point being made. The decision about the style of communication was made during discussions with the YouthVoice creative team about what the campaigners wanted to say, who they wanted to reach and what kinds of communication might attract those audiences. A semiotic and discourse analysis of the campaign resources was also conducted as part of the project, but reporting these results is beyond the scope of this article.

[insert table 1 about here]

Findings

YouthVoice acted as an institutional system that valued voice, where personal experience was respected as a source of expertise with the potential to improve society. As Gabrielle Solder pointed out, this is often an unusual experience for the campaigners.

‘[a campaigner] finds the courage to go, ‘Well, me,’ and say that for the first time and start exploring with [the YPC] what it is that they want to say. [...] it’s not very often, certainly if you’re around the age of 16, that you are asked what it is that you want to say and how you want to say it.’

The approach is designed to empower the campaigners, supporting what they want to say rather than imposing a message on them or making them fit their message to a pre-existing agenda. The CEO described the original vision for the kinds of work YouthVoice would help young people do in very open terms: '[W]e said, "You can do anything you want to, provided you make a difference to at least one other person". So that's the deal'.

Campaigners' experience of voice as value started in the planning phase, where they met their YPC to discuss their focus. Recognition at the individual level – expressed through the freedom to speak their own narrative and the responsive listening of the YPC - gave them the self-belief to continue their journey. Mary explained, '[My YPC] is a really, really nice guy and just even talking to him I just found it useful to talk to someone about OCD who didn't have any knowledge of OCD but could be so understanding at the same time.' The YPC relationship might be described as a love relationship (Honneth, 1996), that facilitates self-confidence and the recognition of one's independence in a context 'guided by care' (p. 107). The self is recognised as both individual, unique and yet constituted through the recognition of others too; this affirmation produces confidence that self-recognition is safe and provides the basis for the future development of self-respect.

In the creative phase, a powerful sense of agency emerged from the collaboration with YouthVoice's creative team to construct the core resource – a tangible artefact that constituted a 'respected expression of their own autonomy' (Honneth, 1996: 118). As Theo explained: 'I've got a very big sense of pride when it comes to the app, I'm quite proud of it and I say 'Look what I did, Look what I did!' Campaigners described their discussions about how to develop the resource as a conversation where their ideas were reflected on in light of the skills and resources that YouthVoice had available. Suggestions were made and

compromises reached – for example, when practical realities impinged on ambition so that the format or content of the resources had to be scaled down or adapted to ensure sustainability over time. However, YouthVoice placed a clear emphasis on the importance of remaining faithful to the campaigners' narratives – for example, by making their experiences the basis for the scripts for Tourettes and OCD films, or using the daily habits of teenagers as the basis for the road safety advert.

Transforming voice from a narrative into a material artefact designed to reach a wider audience provided a focus for a structured communication plan. For campaigners, the experience was the beginning of a form of recognition that approximates the 'rights' level described by Honneth (1996) - not in the sense of enjoying legal status as a citizen, but as an individual entitled to engage in a structured form of purposive communication with the aim of engaging audiences at a societal level. This kind of communication was something normally expected of other, symbolically more important actors – politicians, organisations, celebrities – whose use of public relations is often critiqued for serving their own interests and neglecting society. In contrast, for these campaigners, discovering how strategically managed communication could increase the political power of their (hitherto silenced or marginalized) voice meant they enthusiastically engaged with the process. The right to a voice reinforced their equal citizenship status with others more usually found at the centre of society rather than on the periphery, facilitated self-respect and allowed their political identity to emerge.

The empowerment campaigners felt from being genuinely heard was linked to the politics that underpinned their campaigns – their desire to change the way people thought, felt or behaved about the causes they were publicising and the groups they represented (e.g.

homeless young people, victims of bullying). As such, the listening they were hoping to elicit from audiences needed to be responsive not only to them as individuals, but also as spokespeople for a wider societal issue and as representatives of young people doing good work in society. Their communication was designed to be a form of ‘social effectiveness [that] can demonstrate ... that he or she is universally recognised as a morally responsible person’ (Honneth, 1996: 120).

‘We decided that the big issue that we wanted to tackle in Leeds was the road safety and we felt that it wasn’t being aimed correctly towards young people [...] And straight away we all said we wanted something impactful; we don’t want to produce a document. We don’t want to talk to Head Teachers; we want to address the kids and we want to make our message heard’ Ellen

During the launch phase, campaigners saw and heard the reaction to their resource in a visceral encounter with ‘others’ whose attention they were demanding. The active, responsive listening they engaged in with their audiences brought the mediated space of appearance they had been working with until that point into the quotidian world, leading to the recognition of difference and connection between audience and speaker. Conversations emerged about the issues being addressed and campaigners noted how audiences visibly changed their perception and attitudes, once faced with a very different view of the world to the one they knew. Because the campaigns are based on lived experience, positive audience reactions constituted a solidarity level of recognition – an acceptance of the campaigners’ identities and experiences as important to society. This improved their self-esteem and encouraged them further, as Theo noted:

‘At first it seemed that they weren’t interested to be there, I’m not going to lie [...] and then once we sort of ran through it you could see that their attitude changed like that ((clicks fingers)) and they sat upright and were paying attention to us. And that gave us more confidence and we presented it even more, oh yes, it can do this, it can do this, and it can be used for this and X, Y and Z.’

Theo’s comment neatly illustrates the way in which voice as value incorporates both speaking and active listening – together, they produce a sense of collective recognition.

The dissemination phase complements the launch phase. Online dissemination that prompted reactions in the form of retweets, likes and visits to websites all contributed to the feeling that a resource was valued. Being ‘liked’ or retweeted is an indicator of popularity and value in the digital world (van Dijck, 2013), as Mary’s experience illustrates:

‘I sort of shared it everywhere on Facebook and Twitter [...] it was unbelievable the response from it. I thought I’d maybe hit a couple of hundred people and then all of a sudden it went crazy, you know, and then Derren Brown involved [...], which was pretty something, you know. It was people re-tweeting about all the stuff so it was really cool.’

The online circulation of campaigns extended the ‘career’ (Sun, 2012: 876) of their resource and also facilitated new interactions with previously unknown institutions and individuals, including delivering opportunities to engage offline. This further ‘stretched’ the time and space of their connections with others in the ways described by Silverstone (2006).

Consequently, instead of being positioned at the edges of the world as ‘atomized individuals’

(Svensson, 2014: 179), campaigners found themselves at the centre of events, highlighting and discussing concerns that were shared by others.

‘I’ve had people come up and say that video you did last year or a couple of months ago was fantastic, you really explained everything perfectly. And I got a lot of credit for doing it because on Facebook there’s like groups of people with Tourettes so I shared it all on them and the amount of feedback I got was like unbelievable.’ Adam

Media interest played a particularly important role as a form of institutional recognition for the campaigners, because it gave them a degree of symbolic status as a valued member of society with a positive contribution to make. Media coverage was an eloquent manifestation of voice as value, validating their experiential knowledge as a basis for social change.

‘I’ve been on three different radio stations now and it’s been really, really good. The local papers love the whole thing as well. The Chronicle are just in awe and as soon as something happens it is like put that in the paper.’ Mary

This institutional recognition was reinforced when members of other organisations (councils, schools, health services, related charities) found out about the resource and subsequently invited campaigners to take part in related initiatives. Some campaigners recognised the importance of this engagement insofar as a more powerful ‘sponsor’ was essential for success, because institutions had the power to disseminate the resource widely and reach the people for whom it would be most useful.

[T]hat reception was our make or break moment [...] as awful as it sounds it's sort of up to them, the council etcetera, the authority figures, whether this is going to sink or swim. Because they have the power. The young people, the homeless people, everyone can say this is great, but if the council and the NHS weren't as nice to us [...] as they were this could have been a failure; they could have said, no, that's awful, it was a bad idea. (Theo)

In summary, through their campaigns the participants in this pilot study 'appeared' in the Arendtian sense, commanding attention and dialogue from others through their use of public relations. Because appearance requires 'the active participation of human beings as thinkers, listeners, speakers and actors' (Silverstone, 2006, p. 35), the reflexive recognition of plurality that spaces of appearance produce can also deliver a kind of freedom, 'the freedom to grasp reality in one's capacity to move between positions and different perspectives [...] And, it is the freedom, it might be added, to be heard.' (2006, p. 40). For the participants, freedom emerged reflexively through changes in the way they thought about their own identity and their relationship to others as they communicated. Through recognition, their confidence improved and they developed their belief in their right to be heard as a citizen, and the value of their intervention to society. This is not to say that they were transformed into social and political leaders, nor that their sense of citizenship translated into becoming activists. However, many of them did undertake new initiatives such as developing charities, going back to college to train for youth work, setting up a business, or setting up secondary initiatives about the same cause.

The potential and limitations of public relations in the mediapolis

One of the reasons that participation in YouthVoice has the potential to be deeply transformative is that campaigners found that their voices genuinely mattered to others. Couldry (2010) emphasises the role of political and economic institutions as agents that can facilitate voice by putting in place systems that welcome, recognise, and have the potential to act on a wide range of narratives. As Svensson (2014: 170) puts it, '[t]o speak without anybody listening, or without being able to act change, is a weak form of empowerment' and the findings confirm that institutional support is essential to voice as value and to recognition. Nonetheless, it is important not to conflate voice with public relations that prompts institutional support: campaigners developed the sense that their voice was valued through repeatedly speaking with YouthVoice staff about their experiences and the issue that concerned them, and being actively listened to in those discussions. The fact that the promise they could do 'anything they want' was realised through responsive listening and tangible support with skills and material resources, ensured their voice could develop and grow. The confidence they developed in these safe, private spaces was the precondition for the voice and recognition they derived from communicating strategically in a more public arena.

The need for institutional support for voice is also its Achilles' heel: in the political-economic context of neoliberalism there is no guarantee that institutional support can be relied on in the long term, because economic priorities put constant pressure on organisations' social and political objectives. Even when campaigners were invited into empowered institutional spaces, systems that did not value voice could counter their input at any time. Ed, for example, was invited to take part in the local council's youth consultation after his campaign launch, but youth recommendations were ignored when budget cuts meant the council had to

choose between youth services and other priorities. Voice as value, then, can quickly revert to voice as process, and some 'spaces of appearance' can be deceptive.

Finally, it would be naïve to ignore the role that successful campaigns played in supporting the existence of YouthVoice itself by providing an important public demonstration of their work. Successful campaigns validated the message that YouthVoice was trying to communicate to its funders and other potential campaigners: that young people can make important interventions in society and their voices should be valued. This self-interest is masked in the campaign development process, but emerged when the objectives of the campaigners clashed with what YouthVoice was able or willing to provide. For example, one of the campaigners explained how YouthVoice had initially promised they could develop an app, but subsequently suggested a website because of the ongoing support that an app would require. The campaigners refused to change their agenda, and after mediation from the YPC involved, YouthVoice did help them develop and support the app. The episode revealed the potential for conflict when YouthVoice's desire to develop successful campaigns did not align with campaigners' knowledge of what kind of resource would generate effective change.

The mediapolis itself, understood as a mediated space of appearance, is important as a foundational idea for understanding public relations' role in mediating democratic participation, but it presents problems precisely because of the instrumental role played by public relations in the construction of appearance. Thumim (2012) argues that contemporary self-representations are mediated institutionally, textually and culturally. In this study, institutional mediation came from YouthVoice, whose staff helped campaigners tailor their message to public space, develop their voice and construct the campaign resource. These

processes mean the ‘voice’ that appears in public space is a hybrid of campaigner-plus-YouthVoice. The hybridisation is overt - YouthVoice branding appears on videos, and a YouthVoice representative is present at the launch. While the campaigner is the spokesperson and driver of the communication, this hybridisation makes the claim to individual recognition more complicated, because in their appearance to others, they are inextricably linked to YouthVoice.

Textual mediation occurred through the tools, styles and techniques of communication – the music, visuals, web site technologies and narrative structures of films were all important to how the campaigners’ voices are heard, taken up and circulated (AUTHOR REMOVED, 2015). However, while sharing-friendly, engaging formats are more easily transmitted across a deliberative system, their dominance could disadvantage campaigners whose work is less creative and eye-catching. Cultural mediation was enacted through the campaigners’ and YouthVoice’s knowledge of existing audience behavior and attitudes towards the issue being addressed. YouthVoice staff helped campaigners develop a sense of what the audience might respond to (a focused, tight message; an appealing mode of communication), so that they could communicate successfully. In this way, cultural mediation disciplined campaigners to adopt techniques of ‘strategic communication’, including benefiting from audience targeting, surveillance and categorization and buying into instrumental communication, even as they were trying to make a positive social change. The fact that the need for a strategic approach to communication went unquestioned by the campaigners demonstrates the normative power of such forms of mediation in societies where political action demands a simultaneous engagement with media systems, complex communication technologies and material circumstances.

Conclusion

The study shows how public relations can support the participation of marginalised individuals in democratic deliberation by providing tools for developing voice and securing recognition. It is also a means of transmission – campaigns that were particularly impactful were shared widely on social media, publicised in traditional media and the campaigners developed a level of institutional visibility that further strengthened their voices. Nonetheless, the scope and scale of most YouthVoice campaigns is usually limited: the criteria for taking part is only that one other person in the campaigner's community must be affected as a result of the campaign. In other words, they are designed to influence deliberation on a local level first and foremost and for most campaigners, influence comes in the form of visits to local schools, engagement with local health services, police, social services and councils. It is unlikely that all campaigners feel as empowered as the participants in this study, nor that all campaigns run as smoothly as those examined here. Nonetheless, and while it is important to avoid a utopian view of public relations, in the context of deliberative systems localised spaces of appearance remain important for the quality of deliberative democracy because the communication that takes place within them can be transmitted across the system, and thereby provides the potential for more widespread forms of political action (Dryzek, 2009).

The findings presented here reinforce the importance of interrogating the influence of public relations on the 'distribution of speaking opportunities' (Couldry, 2010: 107) and as a facilitator of effective listening, since 'gaining a voice that matters is predicated on simultaneously gaining an audience who listens' (Macnamara, 2013: 166). How far public relations facilitates voice as value by facilitating spaces of appearance in the contemporary mediapolis, supporting the rights of all groups to be understood in ways that encourage audiences to 'seek to comprehend the Other' (Dreher, 2009: 447), is fundamental to its

democratic potential. In part, this also depends on the availability of public relations skills to individuals as well as organisations. The ability to use public relations strategically constitutes an important part of ‘audience-making’, or the ‘knowledge and skills to attract, retain and engage with audiences’ (Macnamara, 2013: 171), and could address the challenges to civic speaking that Coleman (2013: 418) has identified, including a lack of confidence, the ability to argue, negotiate, persuade, and listen to others. Thus, by providing education or training in ‘public relations literacy’ (Holladay and Coombs, 2013), it may be possible to extend the deliberative possibilities available to marginalised groups.

The arguments being made in this article do not preclude the fact that public relations is often used to limit the quality and quantity of deliberation; rather, they illuminate the reality that these negative influences on democracy can and do co-exist with more productive effects.

While the findings are limited because of the small size of the case and the western theoretical and empirical framing of the study, they also engage with broader debates about processes and practices of democratic participation. The fluid, hypermedia space in which contemporary communication takes place is characterised by accessible technologies that have become part of everyday life for all citizens rather than only a select few, and by networked digital media platforms that ensure communication circulates fast and widely, broadening the basis for democratic engagement (Kraidy and Mourad, 2010: 3, Zayani, 2011).

The campaigners benefited from both accessibility and infrastructure as they worked on dissemination and their cases offer support for claims that online media can act as a route for democratic engagement (Papacharissi, 2004). At the same time, the study reflects the tension inherent to mediatised participation, where instrumental communication strategies involve (re)framing identity in ways that anticipate an audience and its response. As Zayani (2011: 39) notes, ‘[a] mediatized world is also necessarily a mediated world where [...] the notion of

agency—and along with it the cultural politics of identity—are constantly renegotiated'. In the context of individual political struggles such as those presented here, identities may be claimed, constructed and defended in digital contexts, but are explained and debated in powerful face to face encounters where spaces of appearance can materialise.

Table 1. Summary of campaigns.

Campaign topic	Core resource	Content strategy	Campaigner
Bullying	Website	Information dissemination	Ed
Road safety	Public information film	Personal story	Ellen
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder	Animation	Personal story	Mary
Tourette's syndrome	Documentary film	Personal story	Adam
Homelessness	Mobile app	Information dissemination	Theo

Notes

1. All names have been changed to protect participant identities.

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