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Recognising the 'public' in public relations

The notion of public interest has been given attention by many disciplines, ranging from politics, media and law to planning, psychology and even accounting (Johnston, 2017). However, ironically as a theoretical and ethical concern, public interest communication has been largely ignored in public relations scholarship and practice. Paradoxically, it is arguably the failure to be recognised by the community as an essential service that prevents the public relations industry from moving towards becoming a recognised profession in its own right.

Over the past decades PR scholars have highlighted the potential of new digital technologies and in particular social platforms in levelling power relationships, effectively equalising traditional power relationships between organisations and their public relations department, and historically poorly resourced community groups or individuals (Coombs, 1998; Jaques, 2006; Mazzini, 2004). However, focussed on power disparities limited to economic wealth, this argument fails to acknowledge that discrepancies in terms of specialist skills and training, as well as access to dedicated communication departments have continued to perpetuate power disparities.

Globally, issues with major societal and in particular health implications lack a much needed coordinated communication effort due to limited economic benefits for and interest by commercial entities. Issues like climate change and HIV Aids represent a major social and economic cost to respective governments, but commercial opportunities are limited. This paper explores the case of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR), or the emergence of superbugs, which the World Health Organisation has labelled "a serious threat to global public health that requires action across all government sectors and society" (World Health Organization, 2018). Despite the failure to address the challenge being estimated at a global cost of between \$2.1 and \$124.5 trillion by 2015 (Jirka Taylor, 2014), public interest communication efforts have been limited. Indeed, the Australian Government's AMR Strategy and implementation plan appears to entirely ignore public communication as part of its "response to the threat of antibiotic misuse and resistance" (Australian Government, 2015, 2016).

The author argues that there is global need for public interest communication. This represents an opportunity for the PR industry to reposition itself and strive towards professional recognition by recognising and embracing the 'public' in public relations through the sustained commitment to public interest issues with limited immediate commercial benefits.

Keywords: Health communication, public interest, public interest communication, AMR

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