Public Relations in a Global World: Culturally Centering Theory and Praxis

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Abstract

Good communication is critical to the success of organisations. It is more critical in the transnational corporate sphere as global accountability becomes a reality. Recognising community engagement as a corporate resource can lead to understanding of power models in organisations. This paper seeks to centre communication, through a variety of cultural methods, for those communities that have been dispossessed in the contemporary globalisation processes.

Keywords: community engagement, culture-centred communication, transnational capital/corporations

Introduction

The global impact of the financial crisis, the crisis in ethical performance of global organisations, the increasing inequalities between the haves and have-nots across global spaces, the rising protests against global capital, and the changing landscape of public uses of new media have foregrounded participation as a key principle of communication management (Valentini, Kruckeberg, & Starck, 2012). Engagement, reflecting the communication processes carried out by organisations toward the communities within which they are immersed, has started gaining a great deal of attention in communication management as a vital resource for managing publics through participation, especially as a form of organisational response to the global public outcry for organisational accountability (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013). Organisations relate to their publics (both visible and invisible) through engagement,
segmenting them into stakeholder groups, identifying stakeholder needs, and proposing to address these needs preemptively through corporate social responsibility programs (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 2002). To the extent organisations create opportunities for key stakeholders and the members of the public to participate, engagement holds the potential to diffuse crises and shape public policies that serve the goals of the organisation (Campbell, 2007; Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013; Dutta, 2013; Millen & Holtz, 2000; Roberts, 2003). Leveraging tools such as community relations and corporate social responsibility, engagement identifies people as stakeholders and brings them into the folds of the organisation as resources to be managed (Brereton, 2002; Bruce & Brereton, 2005; Roberts, 2003). In this article, I will put forth the argument that engagement therefore is a resource for transnational capital that consolidates power into the hands of transnational corporations (TNCs) while, at the same time, maintaining a veneer of participatory democracy (Dutta, 2009, 2011; Dutta & Pal, 2010, 2011; Harvey, 2005). Through the window-dressing of engagement, communication management ultimately serves the interests of transnational capital through the circulation of knowledge that is framed within the interests of transnational capital, simultaneously erasing the opportunities for participation of subaltern communities, co-opting subaltern communities, and creating communicative inequalities that further sustain the global material inequalities. I will critically examine the flows of power and control in organisational strategies of engagement and knowledge production, juxtaposed against the backdrop of the global trends of inequalities in income and economic access (Millen & Holtz, 2000; Millen, Irwin, & Kim, 2000; Navarro, 1995). Through a critical analysis of the dominant approach to communication management within current organisational contexts, I will put forth a theoretical framework for culturally centering the practice of communication on the goal of listening to the voices of subaltern communities that have hitherto been erased from global spaces of participation.

**Power, engagement and disenfranchisement**

In this section, I will put forth the argument that power is intrinsic to the practice of engagement in a global landscape, with engagement serving as the instrument of control and as a resource for further consolidating power in the hands of transnational capital (Dutta, 2011; Dutta & Pal, 2010, 2011). To understand the role of power, I will interrogate the community engagement programs of the UK-based Vedanta Aluminium resources in the Niyamgiri Hills of Orissa, India (Amnesty International, 2010; Das & Padel, 2010). In 1997, amid the large-scale liberalisation and industrialisation of India, the Orissa authorities signed a contract with
Sterlite India, a subsidiary of the UK-based multinational Vedanta, for the Niyamgiri mining project, proposed to be built in the Niyamgiri Hills, home to the Dongria Kondh indigenous community (Amnesty International, 2010). Violating Schedule V of the Indian constitution that protects tribal land, the indigenous people in the communities were not consulted in the decision-making process that led to the usurping of indigenous land, even as the narrative of the mining operation was framed in the language of engagement, democracy, and sustainability. Under Schedule V of the Indian constitution, local authorities are required to consult local people through *gram sabhas* and *gram panchayats*, local governing structures, before acquiring land in Schedule V areas, thus meant as a mechanism for protecting indigenous rights over land. Participation, written into the structures of the policy framework, was erased through the nexus between the state and transnational capital even as transnational capital used the very language of engagement and participation to reflect the community-directed processes undertaken.

The violation of the policy guidelines for subaltern participation written into the Indian constitution lies at the heart of the engagement narrative put forth by the state–corporate nexus. The Kalahandi District Collector’s office sent out land acquisition notices to landowners in June 2002, noting that the District Administration was going to compulsorily acquire land for the refinery project; people that lost their land would be adequately compensated and people that lost both their home and their land would be compensated as well as resettled. These letters were not sent to landless laborers whose livelihoods were going to be affected by the acquisition as well, thus erasing the landless laborers from spaces of recognition and participation, based on the individualistic framework of property ownership. Moreover, people who had complaints were asked to register these by 22 June 2002 and the public meetings were held on 26 June 2002, thus offering a small window for the voicing of community decisions. The publicity of the meetings was conducted in English and Oriya, in mainstream print media that were typically out of reach for the Dongria Kondh, who were located in spatially disconnected spaces. The meetings were held primarily at the centers of capital, far removed from the spaces of livelihood of the Dongria Kondh. The principles of participation written into the policy structures were violated under the guise of participation. Participation was so framed as to minimise opportunities for that very thing.

In 2006, Sterlite built a refinery in Lanjigarh at the bottom of the Niyamgiri Hills. The building of the refinery resulted in widespread human rights violations as well as environmental pollution in the communities (Amnesty International, 2010; Das & Padel, 2010). Amid rising protests from local community members, in 2007, the parent company, Vedanta Aluminium applied for expansion of the refinery in the area. The refinery
had been built on land that was earlier used by the indigenous communities for farming, and was compulsorily acquired from tribal communities in 2002 and 2004, displacing 118 families and forcing approximately 1200 families to sell their farmlands to the refinery. In its articulation of the decision-making processes, Vedanta frames the public consultation processes as its community engagement strategy, simultaneously obfuscating the language barriers and location barriers that strategically worked to erase the participatory opportunities for the indigenous communities that were being affected by the project (see Vedanta Aluminium, n.d.).

It is in this backdrop of the building of the refinery that the local tribal communities of the Dongria Kondh started organising protests under the umbrella of the Niyamgiri Surakshya Samiti, participating in public demonstrations, and raising their voices of resistance in organised collectives. The community engagement programs of Vedanta in the Niyamgiri Hills are constituted in the backdrop of erasure of local voices in the processes of land acquisition, and often in response to these grassroots processes of resistance. A wide variety of strategies, ranging from buying out local community members to using force, was deployed by Vedanta in Niyamgiri, often under the guise of community relations and community engagement activities (Das & Padel, 2010).

Through the language of engagement, organisations utilise strategies that ultimately work toward displacing subaltern communities from their sources of livelihood. Engagement shaped in the form of community consultation processes often serves as an instrument for intelligence gathering in the community and for diffusing community resistance to organisational operations. In the early stages of a project, the organisation gathers data about the community and about the resources in the community through engagement projects. Therefore, it is critical to interrogate who participates in engagement processes and whose goals are served through these processes. Consider for instance Vedanta’s description of its community engagement processes with the Dongria Kondh published in the report *The Lanjigarh Development Story*:

Key to this approach is local community stakeholder engagement. This means talking to local people including the Dongria Kondhs, listening to what they say and helping them achieve their aspirations where we can. We do this on a regular basis. Chart 6 describes how our planning and stakeholder engagement system works. We often bring in outside experts to do extensive studies to help us and the community address problems such as social inclusion, water conservation and biodiversity, as the next section of this part of the report shows. Vedanta does not claim to be the expert in
all these needs but we have progressively developed
processes of creative, inclusive problem solving, often in
partnerships with NGOs. (Vedanta, 2012, p. 38)

Note here the role of the language of engagement in obfuscating the
critical question of engagement as it relates to Vedanta’s ‘license to
operate’ in the community. The depiction of engagement does not really
address the role of the community in participating in decision-making
processes in determining whether the refinery and the mining operations
are meaningful to the lived experiences of the community. Instead, non-
government organisations (NGOs), experts and other partners are
deployed to address issues such as water conservation, biodiversity and
social inclusion, that detract attention from the fundamental violence
embodied in the presence of Vedanta in the community without due
discussion with community members. The report strategically utilises
‘community engagement’ to obfuscate the erasure of community
engagement in the fundamental functioning of the Lanjigarh refinery.
Furthermore, in response to Amnesty International’s critique of the lack of
community engagement, Vedanta notes:

It was through the stakeholder engagement programme of the
project, required both by law and our own policies and
standards, that the distinct needs of the local communities
were identified and accordingly responded to. For instance,
issues such as healthcare, education and other economic
assistance were established as being of importance to the
local populace including the Dongria and Kutia Kondhs on the
basis of the consultations and deliberations that were held
prior to the drafting and submission of the EIAs. (Amnesty
International, 2010, p. 60)

Once again, worth noting is the identification of community needs under
the rubric of health, education and economic assistance without articulating
the fundamentals of engagement within the framework of community
participation in the decision to build the refinery in the first place. The
veneer of engagement diverts attention from the issues central to the
relationship between the organisation and the community. The critique that
Vedanta erases the opportunity for the affected local communities to
participate in the decision-making process and is not really engaged in the
articulation of participation. Instead, paradoxically, the languages of
participation and grassroots-driven, bottom-up development are rhetorically
positioned to shift attention away from the erasures of participation that
fundamentally constitute the project. Images of hospitals and schools
presented in the report suggest a picture of development catalysed by
Vedanta in the region, while simultaneously erasing the community voices constituted around the issue.

**Culture-centered approach: communication as listening**

The culture-centered approach (CCA) to communication examines the communicative inequalities that are intrinsic to the professional practice of communication as a mouthpiece of dominant coalitions, and instead urges theorists and practitioners of communication to open up spaces for listening (Dutta, 2011, 2013). Based on the understanding that communicative inequalities are intrinsic to the perpetuation of material inequalities, the CCA calls for a framework of listening through collaboration with subaltern communities that are otherwise conceived as target audiences of top-down communication management programs. Listening fosters organisational processes that examine opportunities for conversation, not simply in reformist initiatives that co-opt diverse voices in order to serve organisational agendas, but much more fundamentally in transformative communication processes that offer opportunities for changing the very structures of organisations built on inequalities of opportunities to participate (de Sousa Santos, 2008; Dutta, 2013). In the Vedanta example presented above, the CCA envisions solidarity with subaltern communities in listening to their voices, in recirculating these voices in mainstream structures of governance and jurisdiction, and in working with these voices to offer alternative narrative entry points to the stories told by Vedanta. Listening then would foster openings for conversations that hold accountable TNCs, render transparent the financial and accounting practices of TNCs, and foster opportunities for participation that closely examine the truth claims through which organisational practices can be examined.

Recognising for instance that profit flows in the extractive industries are driven by inequalities in opportunities for representation, recognition and participation, listening in the context of engagement with subaltern communities threatened to be displaced by the extractive industries would fundamentally question who benefits from these industries. The one-way narrative of development couched as engagement and sustainability would need to examine closely, in partnership with local communities, the claims of sustainability and engagement made by TNCs through their communication management teams. It would offer different entry points for conceptualising the role of communicators, shifting from one that serves organisational goals to one that serves the goals and interests of communities at the grassroots, and specifically of disenfranchised communities that are threatened by organisational practices. For instance, the activist group Foil Vedanta is structured around the idea of listening to the voices of the Dongria Kondh, who are threatened to be displaced by the
Bauxite mining operations in the Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha. Here is how the organisation describes itself (Foil Vedanta, 2014):

Foil Vedanta targets the company in London where it is registered. It does this in solidarity and collaboration with people’s movements fighting Vedanta at its various operations worldwide.

Note in the framework of the organisation the sharing of solidarity as a strategy for connecting with people’s movements against Vedanta across the globe, thus disrupting communicative inequalities through partnerships. Solidarity with the erased margins of the neoliberal organising of development serves as a resource for fostering alternative ideas of development. The structures of Foil Vedanta, along with its location in London, create strategic entry points to the dominant structures where Vedanta operates and secures its legitimacy. In August 2013, Foil Vedanta activists performed a carnival demonstration at the annual general meeting (AGM) of Vedanta in London, along with similar demonstrations in Johannesburg and New Delhi that interrogated the legitimacy of the operations of Vedanta in the Niyamgiri Hills. Songs, street theater and protest performances narrated the experiences of the Domgria Kondh. The voices of the Dongria Kondh were reflected in quotations painted on placards in the demonstrations outside the AGM site. Activists collaborating with the Dongria Kondh on the ground in direct action, at global sites of Vedanta’s operations and in the courtrooms of India, were integral to the historic Supreme Court of India judgment in 2013 that referred to the juridical structures for ensuring community participation in the decision regarding the mining operation, and the subsequent gram sabhas that were carried out throughout Niyamgiri, resulting in the decision to halt the mining operations.

Whereas the established framework of communication management has envisioned the role of the communicator as serving the goals of the organisation, often through the deployment of inauthentic strategies, the CCA envisions the key role for communicators in alignment with disenfranchised communities, searching for and highlighting accurate information that is often covered up in dominant public relations practices. In the Vedanta example, the communicator, rather than working with the extractive industries or serving as a mouthpiece to whitewash the agendas of the extractive industries, fundamentally interrogates the practices of the extractive industries and seeks to resist them by working in solidarity with communities at the margins that are threatened by and displaced by organisational practices, fostering spaces for authentic participation and working toward fostering spaces grounded in truth claims. Knowledge works hand in hand with communication in interrogating truth claims and in
simultaneously grounding these claims in evidence and in lived experiences of communities. For instance, collaborations with the Dongria Kondh depicted the physical effects of the bauxite distillery and the red mud pond, juxtaposed against the backdrop of claims by Vedanta that the mining and distillery operations have minimal health and environmental impact.

The theorising of communication management moves beyond the taken-for-granted assumption about the organisation that is being served, to actually working with communities that are being threatened or being displaced by organisational practices. Because transnational capitalism often secures its global reach by the very erasure of exploitative practices at the peripheries of global capital, it is salient to foreground the voices from these peripheries into the global centers of decision-making, policy-making and jurisdiction. To the extent that public relations functions work to manufacture false information to serve organisational agendas, listening emerges as a strategy for disrupting these public relations functions by centering transparency in organisational practice (Jahansoozi, 2006; Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Similarly, in the realm of emerging and new media, listening serves as a framework through which organisational practices can be closely evaluated through the participation of community members, working in solidarity with networks of activists dispersed globally, leveraging networks of global solidarity to articulate alternative entry points for voices of truth grounded in experiences of communities. Foil Vedanta collaborates with indigenous community members residing in the Niyamgiri Hills of Odisha to resist the bauxite mining operations of the UK-registered Vedanta. The voices of resistance in Niyamgiri find expression in global narratives of resistance, articulated in protests at the global centers of financial decision-making and at the sites of power where Vedanta derives its legitimacy. The performance of protests of ‘Save Niyamgiri’ activists at the AGM of Vedanta voice the stories of the Dongria Kondh community that are threatened to be erased by the mining operations of Vedanta. The claims made by Vedanta are interrogated at the very sites of claims-making through the presentation of evidence and through the voicing of community struggles. Online spaces such as the World Wide Web (www) and Facebook emerge as spaces for circulating the lived experiences of the Dongria Kondh in the face of the mining operations in Niyamgiri (Foil Vedanta, 2014):

Anil Agarwal [Executive Chairman of Vedanta Resources Corporation] is again attempting to paint himself as India’s saviour of poverty. When asked about Lanjigarh refinery and the scandal that is the attempted Niyamgiri mine he responded with a dreamy speech about believing that Niyamgiri was
meant for Vedanta. He talked about hearing about Kalahandi as a child – a 'black spot' on India, and its 'poorest poorest place', and how he'd always wanted to do something about it. He said:

'We took courage to go there, no road even or bridge, it was all isolated, we created infrastructure, 7000 got work, not a blade of grass was moved in Niyamgiri.'

This blade of grass is very famous now. It is the same blade he claims he hasn't touched during the last ten years AGMs. Meanwhile the refinery has been built and expanded – displacing families who are now destitute, and the Dongria have been harassed, threatened and even killed. (Foil Vedanta, 2014)

The claims made by Vedanta at its sites of legitimation at the AGM in London are resisted by Foil Vedanta through claims that are grounded in the experiences in the grassroots and through the leveraging of participatory opportunities fostered by new media.

As evidenced in the example of Niyamgiri Hills and the organising of the Foil Vedanta activists, listening creates a transformative space for subaltern rationalities that resist the large-scale dominance of market rationalities, instead offering lessons about alternative forms of economic, social and political organising that are much needed against the backdrop of contemporary crises of inequalities and environmental degradation (Das & Padel, 2010; Dutta, 2011, 2013). Listening opens up opportunities for situating the work of communicators amid activist struggles, in solidarity with the struggles of subaltern communities across the globe that offer alternative and viable entry points for working toward global structural transformations (Dutta, 2011; Kim, 2008; Pal, 2008).

**Conclusion**

In this article, I offered the argument that communicative inequalities are intertwined with material inequalities. Communication, constituted professionally within the organisational structures of transnational capital, is conceived of as an instrument for exerting, reproducing and further consolidating the power of transnational capital, working to reproduce inequalities of participation. Paradoxically, the languages of participation, engagement, dialogue and democracy are often catalysed precisely toward undemocratic ends, to subvert opportunities for participation and representation of subaltern communities. Through the example of the corporate social responsibility and community engagement programs of
Vedanta in the Niyamgiri Hills of India, I depicted the ways in which professional communication works to erase the voices of subaltern communities of Dongria Kondh. Against this backdrop, the participation of the Dongria Kondh in resistive processes in the form of the Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti and the collaboration of the Dongria Kondh with local-global networks of activists in Foil Vedanta offers an example of culturally centered processes of communication that is rooted in the principle of listening to the voices of subaltern communities. Rooting communication in relationships of authenticity, in articulations of truth, and in voicing the lived experiences of subaltern communities offers alternative entry points for transforming the communicative inequalities that underlie contemporary globalisation processes.

References


Subalternity refers to the condition of being erased. In this essay, I put forth the argument that communication is intrinsic to the condition of being erased. It is through the erasure of communicative opportunities that subaltern communities are disenfranchised. The economic disenfranchisement of subaltern communities is tied to their communicative disenfranchisement. By being erased communicatively, subaltern communities are denied opportunities for participating in decisions that affect their lives.

Gram sabhas and gram panchayats are grassroots level meetings, reflecting the local level of political decision-making structures in India, which sit alongside state and national level structures.