Public relations in liquid modernity: How big data and automation cause moral blindness

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Abstract
Despite coming from a world-famous, widely published sociologist and ethicist, Zygmunt Bauman’s thought has not significantly influenced scholarship on public relations. Although Bauman’s works indeed challenge classical theories of public relations, they also offer concepts that can reshape current understandings of how organisations interact with publics. Referring to Bauman’s social and ethical theory, in this article, I argue that amid the transition from solid to liquid modernity, the boundaries between public relations and other communications disciplines also become liquid and ultimately dissolve. As a consequence, experts from traditional disciplines within communications (e.g. public relations, marketing and corporate communications) increasingly compete with data engineers to influence publics, and in the process, their attempts at persuasive communication neglect moral considerations. In light of that dynamic, I contend that the recent data scandal involving Cambridge Analytica does not represent a false start but the dark future of digital communications management.

Keywords
Automation, big data, liquid modernity, postmodern ethics, public relations, Zygmunt Bauman

Introduction
As neatly summarised by Bivins (1993), the roles of public relations have been conceived as ‘controlling publics, responding to publics, and achieving mutually beneficial
relationships among all publics’ (p.118). Whereas the notion of the first role, which roots in fin-de-siècle crowd psychology, premises that public relations professionals not only advocate for clients but also engineer public opinion, ideas about the two latter roles stem from the idealistic premise that public relations professionals, as mediators between clients and publics, are servants of the general public. Given the difference, it should come as no surprise that most public relations practitioners and scholars prefer to be conceived as performing those latter, far less manipulative roles (e.g. Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Heath, 2013).

In this article, however, I argue that conceiving public relations as playing only those three roles no longer adequately encompasses all of the field’s practices, because doing so presupposes a social world, that is solid – certain, ordered and manageable. Herein, I present an alternative understanding of how public relations functions that can facilitate critical reflection on the field’s practices and ethics in contemporary liquid modern societies. My proposed understanding refers to the figurative shift from solid to liquid modernity conceived by Zygmunt Bauman (2000), who, according to Rattansi (2017), is ‘best understood as a latter-day representative of the German Critical Theory tradition and its humanistic, somewhat tangential version of Marxism influenced by Weber, inaugurated by the Frankfurt School’ (p.4). In applying Bauman’s metaphor, I seek to identify ways in which Bauman’s thought can contribute to adequate descriptions and explanations of public relations in the digital age.

On the one hand, in contrast to classical structural functionalism, Bauman’s sociological thought maintains that the contemporary social world is uncertain, discorded and constantly changing, and his works thus address the fragility of boundaries, structures and classification systems (Bauman, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2011). From a Baumanian perspective, the ongoing search for bygone orientations in research on public relations (e.g. Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Edwards, 2011; Heath, 2006; Ihlen and Verhoeven, 2012; Zerfass et al., 2018; Zorn, 2002) is nothing but another manifestation of liquid modernity (Brown, 2011; McKie and Xifra, 2014; Pieczka, 2018). On the other, Bauman’s (1993) postmodern ethics consider how the combination of rational thinking and modern technologies causes moral blindness in a phenomenon that he calls adiaphorisation. From that perspective, the hope that big data and automation can foster mutually beneficial relationships among all publics (Wiencierz and Röttger, 2017; Wiesenberg et al., 2017; Zerfass et al., 2016) is misguided, since algorithmic public relations only propagates moral indifference in attempts to win over publics (Collister, 2017; Pieczka, 2018).

Referring to Bauman’s sociological thought and his ethics, I propose an alternative understanding of public relations in the tradition of critical public relations – to wit, that in the contemporary liquid modern world, public relations cannot engineer public opinion, nor is it inclined to mediate disparate interests, but represents morally indifferent practices of attempting to manage – that is, limit the freedom of – relevant individuals under chaotic circumstances. With that understanding, I make three critical propositions about contemporary public relations in light of the promises of big data analytics. First, amid the transition from solid to liquid modernity, the boundaries between public relations and other communications disciplines become liquid and ultimately dissolve. Second, the more that the boundaries between those disciplines become liquid, the more
that experts from traditional disciplines within communications (e.g. public relations, marketing and corporate communications) compete with data engineers to persuade and influence publics. Third, as public relations transitions into algorithmic communications management, attempts at persuasive communication neglect moral considerations. Applying those three observations, I argue that the recent data scandal involving Cambridge Analytica does not represent a false start but the dark future of digital communications management.

**Bauman and public relations theory**

Spanning a variety of disciplines, including sociology, philosophy and ethics, Zygmunt Bauman’s works have significantly influenced current debates among social theorists, whereas their impact on public relations theory has remained somewhat insignificant (Pieczka, 2018). A reason for the latter trend might be that his few remarks on public relations have been critical, not to say polemic. For example, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, Bauman once stated, ‘The phenomenon of “brainwashing” is eminently present nowadays in both propaganda and commercial advertising – though hiding under the politically correct names of “advertising”, “broadcasting”, “public relations”, downright to “information service”’ (Bauman and Donskis, 2016: 37). Nevertheless, given the potential of Bauman’s thinking to inform public relations theory, in this article, I aim to locate his sociological thought and ethics within that theory. To that end, in what follows, I first describe how Bauman’s works challenge classical understandings of public relations, after which I situate his sociological thought and ethics within broader works of postmodern theory and critical public relations.

**A Baumanian critique of mainstream public relations scholarship**

Called ‘the father of public relations’ by *The New York Times*, Edward Bernays (1971) claimed that the function of public relations is to secure mutually beneficial relationships among all publics. Although admitting that ‘Regrettably, public relations, like other professions, can be abused and used for anti-social purposes’ (p.299), Bernays (1971) nevertheless expressed a conviction that public relations improves society by making ‘it possible for minority ideas to be more readily accepted by the majority’ (p.297). In other words, if public relations did not exist, then inventing it would be necessary.

Bauman (2017), however, would have dismissed such thoughts as the stuff of a so-called ‘liberal conservative utopia’ (p.95) with roots in Talcott Parsons’s theory of structural functionalism. In his typically polemical manner, Bauman (2017) once commented on Parsons’s long-lasting dominance in sociology:

> When I started sociology, American sociologist Talcott Parsons was the dictator who declared what sociology was all about. The most important achievement associated with his name is the idea of a kind of liberal conservative utopia. Parsons saw the role of sociologists as that of serving managers by helping them to solve their problems and make things better: how to prevent workers from going on strike, soldiers from deserting, guerrillas from terrorist attacks, and so on. We sociologists, he said, should rebalance the system by eliminating the disturbing disturbances. (p.95, Author’s translation)
Although Parsons’s structural functionalism lost its place at the centre of sociology, it eventually reached the margins of the social sciences and, two decades later, of public relations as well. To date, the idea of the liberal conservative utopia has emerged most purely in the public relations theories of James E. Grunig and colleagues. Grunig and Hunt (1984), for example, not only adopted concepts central in Parsons’s work, including his well-known AGIL paradigm (pp.8–11), but also espoused the idea that scholars should help organisations by eliminating disturbances, albeit without once citing Parsons. Later, positing that the purpose of public relations research was to guide companies, Grunig (1992b) called for a ‘grand theory’ that would allow public relations scholars to ‘derive the principles of strategic management that show how to manage public relations most effectively’ (p.104). In the same tradition, Dozier et al. (1995) even titled their study ‘Manager’s Guide to Excellence in Public Relations’.

By contrast, Bauman’s concept of society breaks with structural functionalism in all of its forms and disguises as the grand theory upon which classical public relations theory is based (e.g. Grunig and Hunt, 1984: 8–11; Heath, 2013; Ronneberger and Rühl, 1992). As Brown (2011) has stated,

> In the swarms of Bauman’s liquid modernity; in the upside-down ironies of postmodernity; and in the welter of digitisation, the mechanistic rationality of systems theory feels as inadequate to explain PR [public relations] as Newton’s laws of motion were to address Einsteinian relativity. (p.91)

Although not only Bauman but also several postmodern theorists (e.g. Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1990, 2002) who have diagnosed contemporary society since the 1980s have shaken their heads at notions purporting a fully equilibrated society (Duffy, 2000), Bauman’s critical perspective remains unique, as discussed in the following section.

**Bauman and critical public relations theory**

At no time affiliated with the Frankfurt School, Bauman nevertheless received the Theodor W. Adorno Award and is considered to be a leading representative of critical theory emanating from the Frankfurt School (Rattansi, 2017: 4). Even so, the various alternative studies conducted on public relations that can collectively be called ‘critical public relations’ (e.g. Holtzhausen, 2000; L’Etang et al., 2017; Radford, 2011) hardly bear the influence of Bauman’s writings. That trend is somewhat surprising, for critical public relations scholars share Bauman’s understanding that research should not be a stirrup-holder for managers and practitioners (cf. Edwards, 2017) but an instance of reflection that contextualises and questions developments in broader social contexts (Edwards, 2011).

The small body of literature in critical public relations that does incorporate Bauman’s thought draws from three of his major works: *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), *Postmodern Ethics* (1993) and *Liquid Modernity* (2000). First, the core thesis of Bauman’s (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust* is that the Holocaust was not ‘an irrational outflow’ (p.17) along the road to modernity but that only with modern thinking and institutions did the Holocaust and totalitarianism become possible (cf. ten Bos, 1997).
Applying Bauman’s thinking, L’Etang (2014) has argued that public relations historiographers should take into account that the development of propaganda and public relations has been closely intertwined with modern society (cf. Xifra and McKie, 2011; Xifra and Ordeix, 2009). Second, in Postmodern Ethics, a philosophical substantiation of issues discussed in Modernity and the Holocaust, Bauman (1993) criticises the bureaucratic morality and rule-governed ethics that pervade organisations and, as an antidote, aims to develop an alternative ethics. More recently, in Liquid Modernity, Bauman (2000) avers that today’s societies are in a constant state of flux, not despite but because of modern attempts to impose order and stability onto them (cf. Brown, 2011; Christensen et al., 2005; Falkheimer, 2014; McKie and Heath, 2016; McKie and Xifra, 2014). Within his theory of morality and proximity developed across those and other works, Bauman (1989, 1990, 1991, 1993) introduces the term adiaphorisation to describe the phenomenon when reasonable decisions and moral considerations become detached from each other and when acts and decisions occur without regard for morality (cf. Becket, 2004; Fawkes, 2012, 2015; Holtzhausen, 2015; Linehan and O’Brien, 2017; ten Bos, 1997).

Beyond the application of those ideas, however, Bauman’s critical, sometimes polemic writings on the transition from modern to liquid modernity can offer numerous insights for researchers in critical public relations, who generally prioritise pausing in the face of unresolved problems and injustices and daring to think about situations differently. Pieczka (2018) has even posited that following Bauman can afford an ‘inquiry into the ways in which institutionalisation and, paradoxically, professionalization of public relations can be linked to the production of morally ambiguous, if not outright scandalous, behavior’ (p.71).

Algorithmic public relations in a liquid modern world

Pieczka (2018) envisions two ways in which Bauman’s work can contribute to scholarship on public relations. For one, his later work, especially in Liquid Modernity (2000), can help to inform public relations practices in a world that is uncertain, discorded and constantly changing. For another, his observations in Postmodern Ethics (1993) about how the combination of rational thinking and modern technologies causes moral blindness could enlighten current understandings of ethics in public relations. In pursuit of both directions, I develop three propositions that can illuminate current debates on algorithmic public relations.

Dissolving boundaries and bygone orientations

In many of his works, particularly Liquid Modernity (2000), Liquid Love (2003), Liquid Life (2005), Liquid Fear (2006), Culture in a Liquid Modern World (2011) and Management in Liquid Modern World (Bauman et al., 2015), Bauman addresses the fragility of social structures and its consequences for individuals. Along those lines, my first proposition is that the figurative language of liquidity also captures the essence of current public relations practices, their mutability and their indefiniteness: Amid the transition from solid to liquid modernity, the boundaries between public relations and other communications disciplines become liquid and ultimately dissolve.
Although mainstream theorists in public relations have sought to explain the social benefits of public relations, publics have always tended to perceive public relations professionals more sceptically: as masters of persuasion who communicate on the behalf of their organisations or clients. Callison et al. (2014), for instance, have observed that public relations professionals are perceived as ‘smart, friendly liars’ (p.829). Confronting their field’s disreputable image, practitioners and scholars in public relations have tended to relabel their profession or object of study every few years, as Zerfass et al. (2018) explain:

Strategic communication started to replace the discredited term ‘public relations’ in the second decade of the 21st century. The interesting point is that the discipline arose around the term *propaganda* in the early 20th century (Bernays, 1928), but the close link to wartime communication and persuasive publicity stimulated the rise of the term ‘public relations’ by the middle of the century (Cutlip, 1994). Only a few decades later, the pejorative meaning of *public relations* (Ewen, 1996) became so unbearable that even the key academic in public relations at the turn of the centuries, James E. Grunig at the University of Maryland, started to introduce ‘communication management’ as a new term to replace it (Grunig, 1992a). (p.490)

Whereas the accelerated rate at which public relations changes names is typical of liquid modern societies, Bauman conceives that, in fact, there is no essence of public relations that can be relabelled. On the contrary, the social practices of public relations become liquid as it becomes increasingly impossible to control publics, respond to them or have relationships with them (Bauman, 2000: 82). In that light, publics become liquid and are better described as ‘swarms’, as Brown (2011) has recognised:

Bauman’s cultural historiography depicts a world not of systems or even of groups or teams or families, but a world he likens to a swarm of bees in Panama whose movements from their home hive to other hives, as apiologists discovered to their surprise, was not linear or stable or predictable, but random, unstable and chaotic. (p.91)

As publics turn into swarms, the once-solid boundaries of public relations increasingly dissolve, including the boundaries between internal and external communication (Falkheimer and Mats, 2015), between communications professionals and non-professionals (Booth and Matic, 2011; Cheney and Ashcraft, 2007), between marketing and public relations and between media relations and social media management. Ultimately, the essence that remains can be called ‘strategic communications management’, or more simply, ‘rhetoric’: the use of verbal techniques to persuade and influence others that has existed since ancient times (Heath and Ihlen, 2018).

The figurative language of liquidity and swarms clarifies that the search for bygone orientations in research on public relations (e.g. Christensen and Cornelissen, 2011; Edwards, 2011; Heath, 2006; Ihlen and Verhoeven, 2012; Zerfass et al., 2018; Zorn, 2002) is nothing exceptional; instead, from a Baumanian perspective, the lamented, lost orientation is merely another casualty of the liquid modern world, in which practices, publics and relations are fluid (Brown, 2011; McKie and Xifra, 2014: 673; Pieczka, 2018).
Strategic communication management with data engineering

Digital environments do not represent a world of solid communities and publics but one of liquid swarms. Since grand theories of public relations envisioned by Grunig (1992b) and Bernays (1971) cannot cope with the non-linearity, instability and randomness – in a word, chaos – of digital publics, the new vision of many public relations scholars is that the exploitation of big data will accelerate the transition from public relations as an art to public relations as the professional management of strategic communications (e.g. Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015). Against that background, my second proposition is that the more that the boundaries between communications disciplines become liquid, the more that experts from traditional disciplines within communications compete with data engineers to persuade and influence publics.

In their book *The Future of the Professions*, Susskind and Susskind (2015) reflect on how digital technologies will transform the work of human experts in general. In particular, they argue that as artificial intelligence and machine learning absorb and apply expert knowledge, the core work of professionals with a solid body of knowledge, including lawyers, journalists and management consultants, will be threatened. Regarding public relations, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) have similarly projected that digital data traces will become increasingly able to indicate the impact of communication on organisational goals and that new digital technologies promise to create an upwardly open outflow of, for instance, immaterial and material values with minimal input – that is, personnel and material costs – yet afford complete control. For an example, Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) write that:

> [W]ith a smart algorithm a practitioner’s post on a company website can follow the person clicking on and reading the post to her subsequent actions generated by that post. The algorithm can compile a quite comprehensive profile of that unique visitor, which can provide an indication of the way in which the original post affected the reader. [. . .] One can thus argue that through the use of big data one can collect a comprehensive data set of a single person’s actions and behaviors that can help communicators to better track individual behavior of stakeholders as they relate communication activities to the organization. (pp.13–14)

From a Baumanian perspective, such thinking has a place in the tradition of mainstream public relations scholarship as described above and as illustrated by the following example. Bernays (1955) once described public relations practices as ‘planned and executed by trained practitioners in accordance with scientific principles, based on the findings of social scientists’, whose ‘dispassionate approach and methods may be likened to those of the engineering professions which stem from the physical sciences’ (pp.3–4). By analogy, persuasive techniques of influence in liquid modernity can be described as planned and executed by trained data practitioners with an interdisciplinary understanding of correlations, trends and other insights from data streams. Such practitioners collaborate with system engineers, who are specialists capable of transforming data streams into automated, algorithmically personalised channels of communication (Holtzhausen and Zerfass, 2015; Wiencierz and Röttger, 2017; Wiesenberg et al., 2017).
Digital public relations and moral blindness

Many practitioners and scholars who discuss big data and digital technologies seem to await a new era of algorithmic public relations (cf. Verčič et al., 2015; Wiencierz and Röttger, 2017). That sentiment has perhaps been most clearly expressed by the Public Relations and Communications Association’s (2017) statement that, ‘But for all the false starts and dead ends, the future is bright for digital PR’ (p.3). However, because it remains uncertain whether such is truly the case, for my final proposition I draw from Bauman’s notion of adiaphorisation: As public relations transitions into algorithmic communications management, attempts at persuasive communication neglect moral considerations.

Referring to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, Bauman (1990) conceived morality as an immediate responsibility for another person that originates directly from their proximity. Following his ‘Levinasian turn’ (Rattansi, 2017: 173), Bauman became convinced that modern societies do not prevent moral hazard but instead propagate moral blindness. Bauman refers to that phenomenon as adiaphorisation: when ‘systems and processes become split off from any consideration of morality’ (Bauman and Lyon, 2012: 8). Beginning in bureaucratic contexts, adiaphorisation becomes amplified by technologies that limit proximity by stretching social acts across space and time. Digital technologies that exploit big data and automation limit proximity and consequently circumvent the human capacity of moral regulation. Following a similar logic, O’Neill (2016) coined the term ‘weapons of math destruction’ (p.3) to describe how algorithms, when carelessly applied, prompt decisions that harm people living in poverty, reinforce stereotypes and intensify social inequalities.

In digital environments, professionals of persuasion need not be relationship gurus for dense networks of journalists, politicians, activists and other stakeholders but instead have to ensure that digital data streams are evaluated and transformed into automated, algorithmically personalised channels of communication for swarms. As a consequence, the term public relations has been replaced by strategic communications or communications management. Bauman (2005) draws attention to the meaning of the term management, which he defines as behaviours performed ‘to get things done in a way people would not follow on their own and unattended’, and later avers that ‘to manage’ means to limit the freedom of the managed’ (p.53). In the tradition of mainstream public relations scholarship, Bernays as well as Grunig admit that algorithmic public relations can be used for antisocial purposes but nevertheless envision digital technologies that can allow the most effective management of public relations. By extension, public relations professionals do not see ethical concerns ‘as a major challenge’ in that regard (Wiesenberg et al., 2017: 109).

Cambridge Analytica’s data scandal

Referring to Bauman’s social and ethical theory, I have argued that as the boundaries between public relations and other communications disciplines become liquid, public relations professionals increasingly compete with data engineers, which results in attempts at persuasive communication that fail to consider morality. As a case in point,
the recent data scandal involving Cambridge Analytica shows that such a vision has already become a reality.

What cannot be held against defunct public relations company Cambridge Analytica, which was headquartered in the United Kingdom, is its lack of familiarity with big data and automation. On the contrary, the organisation claimed on its official website that ‘Data drives all we do’ (Cambridge Analytica, 2018). As a realisation of that self-conception, the company collected the personally identifiable information of more than 87 million Facebook users in a way similar to that described by Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015). Cambridge Analytica used the data on behalf of its clients to manipulate individuals’ voting behaviours in favour of US politician Ted Cruz in 2015 and in favour of Brexit in 2016. The scandal of such actions, once exposed, raised concerns not only about privacy but also about so-called ‘psychographic targeting’, or the strategic influence of people on the basis of characteristics of their personality (Gibney, 2018). As mentioned earlier, Bauman characterised ‘public relations’ and ‘marketing’ as politically correct terms for brainwashing, and in light of Cambridge Analytica’s data scandal, even advocates of mainstream public relations would have to admit that he had a point. At the same time, they would likely also argue that the ordeal has no bearing on public relations. From a Baumanian perspective, Cambridge Analytica’s data scandal was not an irrational outflow along the road to the professional management of strategic communications. By stark contrast, it revealed a disturbing transition made possible by bids for superiority and the loss of proximity. It performed public relations without considering ethics whatsoever, which one might indeed more concisely call ‘brainwashing’ or ‘propaganda’. Considering that an array of firms worldwide now claim to perform psychographic marketing (Gibney, 2018), the scandal was neither a false start nor a dead end but a stop along the way to the future of digital public relations.

**Conclusion**

Drawing from Bauman’s thought on liquid modernity and postmodern ethics, in this article, I have countered prevailing understandings of public relations, especially the functional strand of public relations research and its liberal conservative utopia, about which Edwards (2017) has critically commented, ‘While PR [public relations] became more visible in teaching and industry environments because of its focus on delivering well-trained young professionals, as an intellectual domain it retained a limited reputation’ (p.18).

Having analysed Bauman’s works, I have proposed an alternative understanding of contemporary public relations as a morally indifferent practice of persuasion, attempting to manage – that is, limit the freedom of – relevant individuals. Although public relations aims to control publics, no organisation or actor can do that, because today’s liquid world is uncertain, disordered and constantly changing. Moreover, public relations is concerned with neither responding to publics nor cultivating mutually beneficial relationships. In digital contexts especially, a lack of proximity characterises the relationship between public relations professionals and their publics. Referring to Bauman’s concept of adiaphorisation, I have argued that exploiting digital technologies (e.g. automation, big data and artificial intelligence) in public relations breeds moral indifference and
moral blindness. In that light, Cambridge Analytica’s data scandal represents not a false start but the dark future of digital public relations. The case shows the argument that algorithmic public relations tries to engineer public opinion through big data analytics and, by doing this, bypasses moral questions, resulting from a lack of proximity. However, even advanced digital technologies are nevertheless not able to control public opinion. The mere example of the use of chatbots and social bots as tools of communications management illuminates ‘how the morality of public relations work can be blunted by long chains of professional actions (standardized practices) that introduce distance’ (Pieczka, 2018: 71).

The critical understanding articulated in this article affords reflection on current trends in public relations practices. Although Bauman’s works may not spread optimism or offer a novel theory about public relations from scratch, and his view on public relations is hardly flattering, his thought could form the basis of alternative theories and, in turn, help public relations to become more widely recognised in scholarship on business ethics.

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