

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:                   MANAGING INTRACTABILITY:  
WRESTLING WITH WICKED PROBLEMS  
AND SEEING BEYOND CONSENSUS IN  
PUBLIC RELATIONS

Luke Capizzo  
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Dissertation directed by:           Erich Sommerfeldt, Associate Professor,  
Department of Communication

Managing intractable or wicked problems—irrevocable, difficult-to-solve, often values-driven conflicts—is a regular occurrence for public relations practitioners. Yet, such problems and how to manage them are often outside of the bounds of public relations theories aimed at building consensus. This dissertation builds on the existing literature carving out a place for dissensus-oriented (e.g., Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Willis, 2016) or agonistic (e.g., Davidson, 2016; Davidson & Motion, 2018; Ganesh & Zoller, 2015) public relations theories and practices. Through interviews with public relations practitioners facing intractable scenarios and the integration of dissensual and agonistic perspectives of Lyotard (1984), Rancière (2010), Mouffe (1999) and others, the dissertation examines the role and impact of wicked problems in practice. Managing intractable problems involves organizational awareness of publics, communities, and societies, as well as a re-evaluation of effectiveness for public relations practitioners. Among its contributions, the dissertation generates a praxis-centered definition of the facets of intractability and new frameworks for social issue engagement and holistic measurement.

MANAGING INTRACTABILITY: WRESTLING WITH WICKED  
PROBLEMS AND SEEING BEYOND CONSENSUS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

by

Luke Capizzo

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Erich Sommerfeldt, Ph.D., Chair

Professor Linda Aldoory, Ph.D.

Professor Brooke Liu, Ph.D.

Professor Linda Steiner, Ph.D., Dean's Representative

Professor Elizabeth Toth, Ph.D.

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables .....	vi
List of Figures.....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Research Questions .....	7
Defining Public Relations.....	7
Wicked Problems.....	8
Consensus-Based Approaches to Public Relations.....	10
Organizational Engagement Approaches to Contentious Issues .....	25
Openness to Non-Consensus Outcomes .....	29
Dissensus and Agonism.....	39
Measurement and Evaluation.....	53
Research questions.....	64
Chapter 3: Method .....	70
Paradigmatic Stance.....	71
Procedures.....	73
Data Collection .....	77
Data Analysis.....	82
Building Theory in Public Relations.....	87
Reflexivity.....	88
Chapter 4: Results.....	93
RQ1: How Do Public Relations Practitioners Make Meaning of Intractable Problems?.....	93
RQ2: How, if at all, Do Public Relations Practitioners Understand Agonism and Dissensus to Be a Part of Their Communication Efforts? .....	116
RQ3: What best practices do practitioners believe they should follow when faced with intractable problems? .....	130
RQ4: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of effectiveness, measurement, and evaluation in the context of intractability? .....	156
Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion.....	172

Discussion: Intractability's Mark on Theory and Praxis .....	175
Theoretical Implications .....	191
Practical Implications.....	207
Future Research Directions.....	214
Limitations .....	220
Conclusion .....	223
Appendix A: Participant & Interview Information.....	228
Appendix B: Interview Protocol .....	230
Appendix C: Consent Form .....	235
Appendix D: Recruitment Script .....	238
Appendix E: IRB Application.....	240
References.....	244

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Participant Background Information and Interview Data	p. 228
----------------------------------------------------------------	--------



## **List of Figures**

Figure 5.1: Facets of Intractable Problems	p. 192
Figure 5.2: SIM Engagement Framework	p. 195
Figure 5.3: Holistic Measurement for Intractable Scenarios	p. 204

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Recently, many high-profile organizations have taken public stances on socially contentious issues. From Target supporting gender-inclusive restrooms (Farrington, 2016) to Walmart ending handgun sales (Sorkin, 2019), such positions have created a new conduit and expectation for corporate awareness of societal issues. Declaring a divisive position on such issues would have been unusual just a decade ago as corporations were reticent to reveal polarizing information and risk alienating customers. Today, in many cases, the risks of staying silent outweigh those of engagement. Consumers have shifted their understandings of corporate citizenship and, in many cases, increased expectations for organizational behavior and responsibility (Logan, 2018). Driven by increasingly networked societies, technological innovation, globalization, and constantly evolving public spheres (Castells, 2008; Raupp, 2011), such changes have created a host of challenges for public relations practitioners and for organizations large and small. Not only are expectations rising for organizational engagement in communities and societies (Dodd, 2018), but the pressures to engage are coming from new sources, including from inside as well as outside organizations.

At the center of many of these challenges are intractable problems—those with no clear solution, no path toward compromise, and a high degree of polarization. Using the concept of *wicked problems* (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Willis, Tench, & Devins, 2018), scholars have begun to interrogate these uniquely challenging situations. While issues management traditionally sees the public policy process as the focal point for organizational engagement (i.e. Crable &

Vibbert, 1985), organizations today face discourse on contentious issues in ways that prioritize values and organizational legitimacy in light of public opinion (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). This represents a shift in venue that may allow public relations practitioners to play a more central role in addressing the community- and society-based problems in which these organizations are involved.

Beginning with Rittel and Webber's 1973 formalization of the term, wicked problems have been understood as hard-to-define, difficult-to-solve, amorphous challenges faced by complex modern societies. Environmental issues (such as fossil fuel dependence and climate change), economic issues (such as entrenched poverty and inequality), and public health issues (such as obesity) each represent "a complex cocktail of social, political, psychological, and economic factors which generate difficult questions for those seeking to address them" (Willis, 2016, p. 308). Organizations may have helped to create some of these issues, but such problems represent community- and society-scale challenges rather than organization-level problems or crises. Thus, the concept of *wicked problems* offers a framework to better understand the types of complex social issues in which organizations are increasingly engaging through public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

In theorizing contentious issues, public relations scholars have looked to concepts such as corporate social advocacy (e.g., Dodd, 2018; Dodd & Supa 2014, 2015), dissensus (e.g., Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015), and social issues management to help understand and navigate their engagement (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Each of these approaches pushes against a central tenet of public relations scholarship—that public relations should

work primarily toward mutually beneficial relationships (Broom & Sha, 2013; Ferguson, 2018; J. Grunig, 2001). The work of managing intractable problems puts practitioners at odds with normative approaches such as relationship management (e.g., Ferguson, 2018; Heath, 2013; Ledingham, 2001, 2006) and dialogue (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002; Lane, 2014; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014) as organizations are often rewarded for agonistic or even antagonistic messages with additional visibility and engagement from publics. Understanding the shared, societal nature of wicked problems means a reorientation away from organization-public relationships and toward relationships among organizations and publics with mutual expectations and responsibilities (e.g., Capizzo, 2018; Heath, 2013).

At best, harnessing the collective problem-solving energy of organizations may yield additional contributions to civil society and social capital (e.g., Heath, 2006; Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015). Higher expectations for organizations within a democracy create the potential for discursive engagement and deliberative problem solving—empowering the public relations function to help organizations participate more fully in their communities and societies (Edwards, 2016; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Understanding the roles and perspectives of public relations practitioners in managing intractable problems allows scholars to identify how such concepts could function in practice at the organizational and practitioner levels.

The purpose of this dissertation is to build theory in public relations focusing on managing intractability, as well as to supplement social issues management approaches to contentious engagement. It will also explore practitioners' experiences

of managing intractable problems and to glean insights into their understanding of such scenarios, their best practices for engagement, and their definitions of success. It examines practitioner meaning making in each of these stages, with an emphasis on non-consensus-based approaches. Interrogating these questions allows for a more complete understanding of real-world practitioner and organizational engagement with intractability and the variety of understudied approaches to managing such issues.

This dissertation serves as a step toward praxis-driven integration of useful postmodern concepts such as agonism and dissensus (e.g., Ciszek, 2016; Davidson, 2016; Mouffe, 1999) into issues management theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath & McComas, 2015). Moving beyond consensus allows for theorizing disagreement and dissent as natural and unavoidable parts of public relations practice, particularly when highly contentious issues are involved. It also moves toward a more inclusive understanding of measurement, as agonism and dissensus call into question the foundations of evaluating success based primarily on changing awareness, opinion, or behavior in the direction of the organization's choosing.

Public relations has often been defined by its focus on the management of mutually beneficial relationships with the publics and stakeholders important to an organization's success or failure (e.g., Broom, Casey, & Richie, 1997; Broom & Sha, 2013; Ferguson, 2018). Public relations practitioners, in this understanding, should use two-way communication to engage publics, understand their perspectives, and develop consensus-focused solutions to challenges. This approach defines success as agreement between an organization and a public, providing a valuable heuristic for

theory and praxis. By contrast, definitions of public relations that do not set mutuality as the standard have been portrayed as less ethically sound (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). Yet, consensus-centric and relationship-focused definitions of public relations struggle to explain organizational engagement on contentious issues that, by definition, antagonizes or alienates certain publics (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Without clearer directions from scholarship, practitioners face a disconnect between normative theories and their need to respond to intractable problems as part of practice.

In order to understand how practitioners have adapted to changing societal expectations of organizational behavior and legitimacy, this dissertation examines their meaning making from managing intractability, including describing experiences, best practices, and measurement. It draws on 41 interviews with practitioners from across the country and from for-profit, nonprofit, and governmental organizations. Their narratives and perspectives of managing intractability in practice form the backbone of the implications and theory building in this dissertation. Often, the central element in these stories was the decision to engage or not engage in public discourse on contentious issues. By examining participant definitions of intractability, actions, and best practices for engagement and measurement, the results and implications make a significant contribution to understanding the phenomenon of intractability in public relations practice.

The theoretical development includes an articulation of the facets of intractability, a social issues management engagement framework (outlining four distinct types of engagement), and a holistic measurement approach to better understand the multiple levels of impact public relations engagement can have on

campaigns, organizations, and communities. Practically, the dissertation offers a variety of best practices for engagement in intractable scenarios, drawn from participant experiences. It explains how intractability is a reality for many practitioners. While terms such as dissensus and agonism may not have been familiar to participants, their daily efforts to communicate in highly contentious scenarios clearly reflected these pluralistic perspectives. Finally, it addresses the centrality of two understudied concepts in public relations, the role of values (organizational, professional, and personal) in decision making, and the importance of internal communication and employee issues in driving or contributing to intractability.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Research Questions**

To help position the contributions of this dissertation, the literature review provides a brief definition of public relations and an overview of wicked problems. It then discusses public relations approaches that emphasize consensus before moving to contextualize and operationalize the postmodern concepts of dissensus and agonistic dialogue. It will point toward spaces where traditional relational, symmetrical, or mutually beneficial approaches have begun to push the boundaries of consensus, such as complexity (Murphy, 2000) and contingency theories (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997). This culminates in the argument that postmodern concepts provide additional perspectives on solving wicked problems and should be integrated into public relations scholarship and practice. Finally, it will review traditional and emerging theories of measurement and evaluation in public relations, underscoring the need to align metrics with desired outcomes—both from within and beyond the organization.

### **Defining Public Relations**

Many leading definitions of public relations put mutuality at the center of the practice. According to Heath and Coombs (2006), “public relations is the management function that entails planning, research, publicity, promotion, and collaborative decision making to help any organization's ability to listen to, appreciate, and respond appropriately to those persons and groups whose mutually beneficial relationships the organization needs to foster as it strives to achieve its mission and vision” (p. 7). Broom and Sha (2013) define public relations as “the



management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (p. 5). These perspectives, and many others like them, have set the tone for scholarly study of public relations, positioning mutuality and strengthening relationships as centers of practice.

Alternatively, this study follows Edwards’ (2011) definition of public relations as “the flow of purposive communication produced on behalf of individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups, through their continuous transactions with other social entities. It has social, cultural, political and economic effects at local, national and global levels” (p. 21). This understanding decouples public relations from a purely organizational context as well as from normative commitments to mutually beneficial relationships. In seeking to generate new practical understandings of public relations through interviews with practitioners, this dissertation must begin with a definition that provides adequate space for theoretical exploration beyond consensus.

### **Wicked Problems**

Practitioners regularly face challenging scenarios that test all of their communication and management skills. Contentious issues and crises may have mutually beneficial resolutions and temporary solutions (Craib & Vickers, 1985), but sometimes the situation brings up challenges without a clear direction for resolution or progress. Rittel and Webber’s (1973) understanding of *wicked problems* grows from the inability of society to govern or overcome specific shared issues. Such problems are a result of pluralistic societies’ inherent inability to solve conflicts. They

define *wicked problems* with multiple characteristics, including that they are idiosyncratic, lack clear solutions (or knowledge of when they are solved), deeply entangled with other problems, and, maybe most importantly, that they are real: not acting or acting improperly has genuine consequences for individuals and communities involved (pp. 161-166). Such issues are often ambiguous, contentious, and solution-resistant (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). As they are difficult to define, the construal of the problem itself has an outsized impact. According to Murphy (2000), “in wicked problems (global warming is one example), the goal is not obvious, and the way one formulates the problem is as significant as the way one answers it” (p. 448). Interestingly, Rittel and Webber (1973) point to a misapplication of positivist principles as a key factor in the development of such problems: “The social professions were misled somewhere along the line into assuming they could be applied scientists that they could solve problems in the ways scientists can solve their sorts of problems. The error has been a serious one” (p. 160). Such issues include climate change, drug trafficking, poverty, and enduring public health issues like obesity (Willis, 2016) as well as contentious social issues such as racially or religious-based conflicts (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Given their complexity, uniqueness, and consequences, such problems cannot be easily patched over or ignored.

Coombs and Holladay (2018) make the case that the rapid evolution of such *wicked problems* in today’s society, combined with the increasing imperative for organizations to engage with publics regarding contested issues (Coombs & Holladay, 2015), points toward a need for new understandings of what they term

*social issues management*. Their approach points toward measurement of communication and management efforts as “effective or ineffective” (Coombs & Holladay, 2018, p. 93). Yet, such clear judgements are difficult, if not impossible, in light of the multifaceted nature of the challenges at hand.

The complexity of *wicked problems* calls for deepening the understanding of both non-consensus-based public relations practices as well as measurement and evaluation approaches. This has the potential to provide value for public relations both from a functional and societal perspective (Willis, 2016). The following sections will delve into consensus-based approaches in public relations, including organization-public relationships (OPR), excellence theory, issues management, dialogue, and deliberative frameworks, pointing toward shortcomings for intractable scenarios.

### **Consensus-Based Approaches to Public Relations**

**OPR and excellence theory.** The relational approach to public relations practice and scholarship was put forth by Ferguson (2018) in 1984 as a fruitful area for theoretical development and practical contribution. Relationships are a way to track and measure the success of public relations activities (Broom, Casey, & Richie, 1997) with a variety of useful variables, including trust, mutuality, openness, and reciprocity (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Ledingham, 2006). Relationship-based research has informed a variety of contexts, including the excellence theory (J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006), internal communication (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; McCown, 2007), relationship maintenance (Shen, 2011), and crisis communication (Coombs, 2007), where relationship history is a key

variable. J. Grunig (2011) positioned a relational approach as coming from a postmodern perspective, as it “gives voice to and empowers publics” as part of organizational management (p. 14). While some scholars might question this epistemological interpretation on the grounds that OPR views publics as instrumental to organizations rather than as fully autonomous individuals, this approach has nonetheless opened the door for activist and publics-centric theory development (L. Grunig, 1992).

OPR research measures the quality or strength of relationships through a variety of dimensions, including “degree of agreement between organizations and publics” (see Broom & Dozier, 1990) and “perception of agreement” (Ledingham, 2006, p. 470). Hon and J. Grunig’s (1999) influential six dimensions of relationships include trust, control mutuality, and communal relationship. At heart, relational approaches are centered on mutual benefit for organizations and publics:

Programs designed to generate mutual benefit as part of the relational process can engender public support, which in turn affects the ability of an organization to meet public expectations and to achieve organizational goals. And, an organization's ability to measure the impact of meeting the common needs, wants, and expectations of interacting publics is both appropriate and, in both the short and long term, productive. (Ledingham, 2006, p. 479)

Each of these relational perspectives emphasizes shared benefits, embracing consensus understandings of effective management.

Research regarding organization-public relationships (OPR) aligns with an excellence theory perspective in that it positions the organization at the center of

relationship analysis and relationship building as a crucial part of symmetrical communication (J. Grunig, 2006). The excellence theory emphasizes that excellent organizations have public relations as a management function (rather than a solely tactical function), with access to the dominant coalition (organizational leaders) and decision-making input, as well as a diverse and well-trained professional staff (J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). A significant part of this function is understanding “the critical role of relationships in the planning and evaluation of public relations programs” (J. Grunig, 2006, p. 154). Public relations should be about building such relationships for mutual benefit among organizations and publics: a strategic management activity rather than a messaging activity (J. Grunig, 2011). Its communication should reflect “the information needs of publics as well as the advocacy needs of organizations” (p. 14).

For J. Grunig (2006), the normative ideal of public relations practice is the two-way symmetrical model. Under this approach, practitioners should practice coorientation to “adjust their ideas and behavior to those of others rather than try to control how others think and behave” (p. 156). Public relations acts as the eyes and ears of organizations in understanding and communicating with the outside world, but it is not neutral: “Public relations educates and persuades publics by advocating corporate interests, but it also negotiates with publics when a collision of interests arises” (J. Grunig, 2011, p. 14). This places a premium on environmental scanning approaches to understand how publics perceive certain issues, and to help organizations uphold a “triple bottom line” across economic, social, and environmental fronts (p. 11).

Within this framework, organizations may be most successful when utilizing a mix of strategic approaches. J. Grunig (2000) explained that not all issues can be resolved using two-way symmetrical communication, acknowledging that “mixed motives models,” such as Murphy’s (2000), could be understood as deepening the understanding of the full range of public relations practice outlined in the symmetrical model (p. 33): “Professional public relations involves both asymmetrical (compliance-gaining) tactics and symmetrical (problem-solving) tactics” (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992, p. 312). Additionally, asymmetrical approaches can temporarily contribute to a long-term symmetrical approach to organization-public relationships (J. Grunig, 2001). In this way, the OPR and excellence theory can stretch to accommodate asymmetrical tactics if they still support moving toward consensus.

There are circumstances where publics and organizations may find coorientation or alignment not only difficult, but undesirable (e.g., Ciszek, 2016; Holtzhausen, 2002; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015; Leichty, 1997; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). Relational approaches to public relations do little to provide space for broader understandings of relationships that may not be built on mutual understanding (Zaharna, 2016), or for morally repugnant publics (Cancel et al., 1997). Conflicts may be too deep to be overcome through collaboration (Leichty, 1997). Coombs and Holladay (2015) criticized OPR scholarship as actually studying *parasocial relationships*: in essence, one-sided or fake relationships with those who do not reciprocate communication. Heath (2013) critiques OPR scholarship as being overly focused on one-to-one or dyadic relationships, rather than relationships with multiple others, which he terms *organizations-others relationships* (OsOsRs). This

moves the focal point beyond the organization, to a community (geographic or symbolic) that OPR scholarship may have difficulty in finding based on its narrow variables (e.g., Hallahan, 2004; Kruckeberg, Starck, & Vujnovic, 2006; Saffer, Yang & Taylor, 2018). Even J. Grunig (2006) acknowledged that while two-way symmetrical public relations should be the preference of most practitioners under the right conditions, there are many obstacles to its implementation, beginning with a lack of practitioner knowledge on how to achieve them.

If *relationships* do not meet the needs of public relations scholars or practitioners to adequately understand the full spectrum of interaction with publics in intractable situations, might an approach centered on *issues* provide insights? Issues management brings contention and disagreement to the center of analysis, opening the door to outcomes that do not necessarily strengthen stakeholder relationships.

**Issues Management.** Issues management scholarship arose from a need for corporations to protect their interests from external, often adversarial forces (Chase, 1984), but has evolved into a much more holistic understanding of how organizations interact with the critical issues in their societies and communities (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Early proponents, including Public Relations of Society of America co-founder Howard Chase, defined the field with a clear solutions-based approach:

Issue management is the capacity to understand, mobilize, coordinate and direct all strategic and policy planning functions, and all public affairs/public relations skills toward achievement of one objective: meaningful participation in creation of public policy that affects personal and institutional destiny.

(Chase, 1982, p. 1)

Another key facet of issues management scholarship is the understanding of the debates or discussions with potential to impact on the organization, known as *issues*. According to Crable and Vibbert (1985), “an issue is created when one or more human agents attaches significance to a situation or perceived ‘problem.’ These interested agents create or recreate arguments which they feel will be acceptable resolutions to questions about the status quo” (p. 5). Not all issues are equally important. They hold distinct statuses based on public perception. Issues can have dormant, potential, imminent, current, or critical status based on the possibility, probability, and timing that they will emerge or have already emerged for public discussion (Crable & Vibbert, 1985).

The focus of issues management scholarship in public relations has been to help organizations evaluate and address issues proactively in alignment with communities and stakeholders (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Jaques, 2008). It involves environmental scanning and active sense-making by practitioners to identify issues as a prerequisite to community-focused approaches and relationship building (Lauzen, 1997). Heath (1991) explained the centrality of issues management as part of public relations in that the process helped align organizations within their societal and community contexts: “Public relations research and theory should assist companies and other organizations’ efforts to achieve their goals while *establishing harmony* with their stakeholders” (p. 187, emphasis added). It includes functions such as connecting public policy analysis to business planning, understanding CSR standards and expectations, responding to emerging issues, and evaluating the impact of relevant issue communication (Heath & Nelson, 1986). Each of these approaches



emphasizes alignment, whether in the best interests of the organization, its communities, or both.

One driver of this process is establishing *legitimacy* or alleviating the *legitimacy gap*, the difference between community or public expectations for an organization's operation and its actual functioning (Sethi, 1977). In order to be legitimate, organizations must demonstrate their worth or value to society—"that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). In this way, emphasizing such a gap (and its elimination) focuses organizations and practitioners on alignment with societal and community norms and expectations. The approach seeks to alleviate issues by changing public perception of an organization's activities or changing the activities themselves to move toward consensus among stakeholders.

Several models of issues management have emerged in business and public relations scholarship. Chase (1984) proposed a four-step model including issue identification, issue analysis, issue change strategies, and issue action programming. *Issues* arise and are debated among three "interrelated and interdependent" groups: citizens, business, and government actors (p. 35). This communication-centric approach emphasizes practitioners' work in finding and researching relevant issues, then developing strategic approaches to engage with the issue through a reactive or stonewalling approach, an adaptive posture, or a fully dynamic or proactive method. It points toward consensus, but acknowledges that the process is, at heart, about the goals of the organization. Crable and Vibbert (1985) proposed the catalytic model,

which positions organizations at the center of managing external issues as they arise in society. Their model tracks the issues themselves through five stages of their lifecycle: from *potential* issues, through *imminent* and *current* levels of importance, to *critical* and, finally, *dormant* (pp. 5-6). Their *catalytic* approach emphasizes in agenda-setting practices throughout the issue stages—not only after they have come to public attention. In this way, “issue management can influence ‘policies’ long before policy options are created by others” (p. 9). In both cases, issues management is positioned as a tool for corporations to help communities and societies understand their viewpoints.

More recent scholarship has emphasized a deliberative or community-centric approach to working with societal stakeholders. Such discourse should, ideally, focus on debate and sharing perspectives in ways that allow publics to evaluate the legitimacy of their positions, rather than an argument weighted toward “winning” a specific issue or policy decision (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). In this way, organizations can function as positive actors in societies that become more fully functioning (Heath, 2001, 2006). Publics often have distinct and competing interests, creating a potential paradox for organizations attempting to solve or resolve community problems or public issues (Waymer, 2009). This conception has been coined *strategic issues management*, and defined by Heath and Palenchar (2009) as:

an amalgamation of organizational functions and responsive culture that blends strategic business planning, issue monitoring, best-practice standards of corporate responsibility, and dialogic communication needed to foster a

supportive climate between each organization and those people who can affect its success and who are affected by its operations (pp. 8-9).

This definition emphasizes the multiple facets of issues management, centered on engagement in public policy processes within and among communities. Issues management should be proactive, rather than reactive, research-driven rather than tactical, and ethically informed rather than profit focused (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Mutuality, relationship building, and alignment with stakeholders and communities are crucial outcomes of effective practice. Understanding issues properly helps organizations act in ways that align with communities and contribute to fully functioning societies (Heath, 2006). At best, issues management practices have the potential to create the conditions for dialogue and community building (Madden, 2018). Yet, as underscored by Coombs and Holladay (2018), *wicked problems* do not fit neatly into the alignment-centered frameworks of issues management and policy processes. Issues management judges effectiveness through de-escalating conflict rather than attempting to understand it.

**Dialogue.** Another area of public relations scholarship is the significant research exploring the concept of dialogue, encompassing work on ethics (e.g., Kent & Lane, 2017; Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015; Pearson, 1989; Toledano, 2018), digital approaches (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002), and socio-cultural understandings (e.g., Capizzo, 2018; Heath, 2006). Dialogic approaches, often centered on the philosophies of Martin Buber and Carl Rogers, emphasize the importance of understanding *the other*, relinquishing power, and creating spaces for shared meaning, understanding, and compromise (e.g., Lane, 2014; Kent & Taylor,

1998, 2002). Such perspectives, beginning with Pearson's (1989) groundbreaking work, position dialogue as an ethical form of communication, which reduces structural power differentials between organizations and publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002), and views stakeholders as valued participants, rather than instrumental targets for organizational messages (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Kent and Taylor (2002) highlight five features of dialogue: *mutuality*, *propinquity*, *empathy*, *risk*, and *commitment*. Each feature points to a distinct aspect of relationships, in service of ethical and balanced conversations where both sides are active, aware, and engaged participants, creating an openness for moments of *genuine dialogue* to appear (e.g., Kent & Lane, 2017; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018). While many scholars have attempted the challenge of operationalizing this complex term (e.g., Bruning et al., 2008; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Ward & Sweetser, 2014), others have warned that such efforts—along with unclear practitioner understandings—have contributed to the phenomenon of *dialogue-in-name-only* (Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015). In this way, the term has become popularized in practice, but risks losing the value of its originally narrow meaning (Kent & Theunissen, 2016).

Multiple understandings of dialogue emphasize collaboration (Capizzo, 2018; Lane, 2014; Penman & Turnbull, 2012). Buber's dialogue centers on enlightened understandings of *the other*, while Bohm (2006) and Gadamer (1980) focus on constructive models of dialogue for problem solving (Anderson, 2003; Lane, 2014). Bohm's (2006) model involves discursive groups of 20-40 individuals, constructed to facilitate shared meaning making and to address shared issues and develop concrete action plans. Additionally, Bohm understands dialogue as an ongoing process, in

contrast to Buber's (1958) or Rogers's (1957) use of ephemeral dialogic moments. Gadamer's (1980) approach focuses on two individuals engaging in a back-and-forth interaction generating communicative action and mutually beneficial results. In sum, these dialogic scholars and approaches share a commitment to dialogue as a constructive process with the potential for mutual benefit, often achieved precisely because of mutual risk-taking.

Several others understand dialogue as collaborative, but emphasize its public nature, rather than the act as a private, shared connection (Capizzo, 2018). Russian literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) describes dialogue among authors and readers: the public conversations that generate shared understanding among communities, professions, and publics. He sees this not as a momentary phenomenon, or even a simply ongoing process, but as a constitutive feature of human culture and language (Holquist, 1990; Todorov, 1984). Heath (e.g., 2000; 2006) brings this public conception into public relations scholarship as *open dialogue*, part of a fully functioning society approach to organizational engagement with communities. This includes organizations, publics, and communities working together toward “enlightened decision-making” (Heath, 2006, p. 99) and collective management of risk. For Heath (2006), organizations build and reinforce their legitimacy within society through reflectivity, willingness to collaborate, proactive outreach, and understanding of shared interests: “The best logic is not what is metaphorically in the interest of General Motors is in the public interest. The better logic is this: What is in the interest of public is in the interest of General Motors” (p. 102). This approach allows for an understanding and representation of the organization's interests within

community context. Organizations can advocate, but they do so as “dialogue through statement and counterstatement” (p. 108). Such public approaches to dialogue create a bridge between shared understanding and deliberative-centric and civil society models for public relations and organizational communication in societies.

Yet, dialogic scholarship in public relations has come under significant criticism, both from those who question the field’s “infatuation” with the term at the expense of pragmatism (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006, p. 173) as well as those who utilize it simply to represent a broad cross-section of two-way communication rather than *genuine dialogue* (Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Stoker and Tusinski (2006) emphasize the values organizations purport to endorse as being more critical than the processes of dialogue:

The common ground sought by competing parties is not as important as the common principles of truth, freedom, liberty, and human rights that both espouse. Organizations should engage in communication because they recognize the sovereignty of the individual, value liberty, and seek truth. They disseminate ideas as a matter of conscience and listen to public response as a matter of principle. (p. 174)

This critique outlines a central limitation of dialogue (and, more broadly, accommodation), particularly within the context of intractable issues: How far can and should organizations be willing to compromise their values? Dialogue, while extremely valueable for situations where both sides are willing to risk exploration of mutually beneficial outcomes, does not provide guidance on the rest of the spectrum of engagement related to intractable issues.

**Deliberative frameworks.** Public relations scholars have also explored the communicative roles that organizations can play in deliberative systems and democratic discourse (e.g., Edwards, 2016; Heath, Waymer & Palenchar, 2013; Hiebert, 2005) as well as civil society (e.g., Sommerfeldt, 2013a, 2013b; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Taylor, 2010). Public relations can serve to build social capital among networked organizations and publics (e.g., Ihlen, 2005; Raupp, 2011; Saffer, 2016; Saffer, Yang & Taylor, 2018; Taylor, 2011). It can connect and constitute communities (Kruckeberg, Stark & Vujnovic, 2006; Self, 2010). It can also serve the interests of the powerful over those without the resources (literal and figurative) to access its channels (e.g., Curtin & Gaither, 2005; L’Etang, 2009; Pal & Dutta, 2008). In this context, public relations takes place within public spheres that can be nationally bounded (Habermas, 1991), transnational, or global (Castells, 2008). The public relations function also plays a constructive societal role by contributing to the growth of civil society and the accumulation of social capital (Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011). Recent scholarship has examined the role of the network within such systems, particularly the ways in which communicative outreach by organizations can create value through networks—either by utilizing network positionality or by leveraging strong or weak ties (Saffer, 2016; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017).

Deliberative understandings of public relations prioritize “rational, reasonable, open, and inclusive debate” (Edwards, 2016, p. 61) among organizations and citizens in societies. Edwards utilizes *deliberative systems* (Dryzek, 2009), understanding the field’s contributions as part of policy debates in distinct arenas of public discourse.

This approach allows for contestation of ideas, and helps organizations to conceptualize publics as fellow stakeholders within societies, rather than as consumer targets, or adversarial activists. Public relations functions as “an important mechanism for transmission” of ideas between and among separate deliberative spaces (Edwards, 2016, p. 70). While public relations can be used by organizations to engage in “selfish advocacy” (p. 74) and reinforce structures of power within deliberative societies, it can also increase a society’s deliberative capacity, allowing organizations without existing resources or visibility some access to policy agendas and processes:

The fact that public relations at a systemic level tends to support existing power structures that influence deliberative systems, for example, does not negate the good it can do when used by marginalized actors as a means of engaging in deliberation on a specific issue, or when enlightened corporations use it as a means of genuine engagement with audiences. (p. 73)

In these ways, deliberative approaches, while still grounded in collaboration, move public relations away from organization-centric issues management approaches, and reflect the potentially positive impacts the field can have in connecting and empowering civil society actors (Sommerfeldt, 2013a). Deliberative systems also open the door for productive engagement related to thorny social issues and *wicked problems*, but they also privilege consensus and compromise at the expense of the multiplicity of competing voices which hold the potential to improve organizations, communities, and societies. Perspectives such as Mouffe’s *radical pluralism* serve to challenge the traditional deliberative models from an agonistic perspective, placing



higher expectations on public relations practitioners to acknowledge and sanction contention and disagreement (Davidson & Motion, 2018).

**Summary of consensus approaches.** In sum, each of these approaches—relationship management, excellence theory, issues management, dialogue, and deliberative theory—have provided significant value for public relations scholarship and praxis, but all prioritize consensus, agreement, and mutuality without seeing the full potential and value in alternatives. Reviewing them helps to illustrate the challenges and opportunities for public relations scholarship addressed by this study. Relationship management and excellence theory have generated well-developed frameworks for measuring relationship strength (Hon & Grunig, 1999), and have emphasized the importance of the diverse perspectives that the public relations function should bring to the management table (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Similarly, dialogue and deliberative theories have given organizations the tools to deeply understand and enact productive, mutually beneficial conversations both with individuals or groups (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014) as well as within public spheres and deliberative societies (Edwards, 2016). Issues management, while putting contention and societal awareness for organizations at the center of its understanding, still looks to organizational and community alignment as its goal (e.g., Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Sethi, 1977). These theories prioritize consensus, potentially obscuring the value of non-consensus-based processes and outcomes. Practitioners and organizations regularly make choices that go against such normative perspectives centered on mutual benefit. The next sections address theories that have begun to tackle such questions more directly.

## **Organizational Engagement Approaches to Contentious Issues**

Heretofore, the chapter has outlined relational approaches in the public relations literature. The next section takes up a discussion of theories designed to tackle divisive issues, including wicked problems. As organizations often find themselves in situations without clear mutually beneficial outcomes or with “morally repugnant publics” (Cancel, et al., 1997, p. 38), public relations scholarship must look beyond consensus to other goals. Additionally, This next section explores several public relations and management concepts specifically addressing contentious issues.

The next sections will explore three leading understandings of organizational engagement on social issues: social issues management (SIM), corporate social advocacy (CSA), and political corporate social responsibility (PCSR). The first evolved from the aforementioned issues management literature, with an emphasis on managing engagement in discourse regarding value-laden social issues outside formal public policy processes. The second and third have emerged from CSR literature, conceiving of social advocacy as a growing area of corporate social responsibility. These literatures have come the closest to addressing intractable scenarios as their primary focus, but have still, in many cases, prioritized consensus outcomes at the expense of a more holistic view of organizational engagement in these situations.

**Social issues management.** The SIM framework developed by Coombs and Holladay (2018) begins with the premise that organizations often have no choice but to speak publicly about their stances on conflict-laden social issues, and, in turn, attempt to influence stakeholder views on such issues. They refer to a difficult-to-solve issue such as a *wicked problem*: “ambiguous, contentious, has no definitive

resolution, and is resistant to solutions” (p. 79) or what Bigam Stahley and Boyd (2006) refer to as an organizational paradox. Coombs and Holladay (2018) updated the policy-focused catalytic model of issues management (Cable & Vibbert, 1985), with its five distinct stages (potential, imminent, current, critical, and dormant) to reflect a fluid, less sequenced approach using four tasks: definition, legitimacy, awareness, as well as a dormant state:

Both issues managers and those analyzing the issues management effort should focus on the communicative tasks of definition, legitimation, and awareness rather than specific stages in the issues management process. Social issues management is extremely fluid and emphasizing the communicative tasks seems the best way to capture that fluidity (Coombs & Holladay, 2018, p. 85).

This approach involves potentially different actors at each stage, based on the different stakeholders and community members who may be involved in issue definition, legitimation (of the issue as well as the organization or messenger), and sharing awareness of the organization’s position and actions. Additionally, social issues may be distinct from other public policy choices in that they “have no solution or permanent outcome” (p. 92) and are only settled temporarily.

Coombs and Holladay (2018) point toward four types of SIM advocacy used by corporations: *epideictic advocacy*, *values advocacy*, *organizational epideictic*, and *corporate social advocacy* (CSA). Corporations practice epideictic advocacy when they praise or blame specific community or societal values (Cable & Vibbert, 1983), while values advocacy adds a self-serving component such as reputational

enhancement (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994). Organizational epideictic focuses on values advocacy that can include more contentious issues (Bigam Stahley & Boyd, 2006), while CSA refers to instances where corporations “align themselves with a controversial social-political issue outside of their normal sphere of CSR interest” (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288). Together, these four approaches form a continuum from issues and approaches that are least controversial (epideictic advocacy) to inherently controversial (CSA).

**Corporate social advocacy.** The CSA framework provides a way to examine the impact of social issue engagement for corporations. Generally, CSA refers to corporations engaging with potentially contentious issues outside of their usual industry or sphere of influence (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Taking a stance on a contentious issue, also referred to as “brandstanding” (Pratt et al., 2011, p. 73), can impact stakeholders and publics—attracting some and repulsing others. Aligned values contribute to increased purchase intention and positive financial impact for corporations (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). Critically for the context of organizational legitimacy, Dodd and Supa (2014) explain that organizational engagement on such issues is seen as voluntary, and thus potentially more reflective of a moral legitimacy understanding of issues (Suchman, 1995) or a deliberative rather than an instrumental view of CSR (Seele & Lock, 2015). By using measures of consumer alignment and purchase intent, Dodd and Supa (2014, 2015) position CSA squarely within the camp of consensus-based theories, limiting its ability provide insights in more contentious scenarios.

**Political CSR.** Political CSR (PCSR) presents a deliberative framework using public discussion as a means for moral legitimacy (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006, 2008). The concept encompasses scholarship connecting organizations' CSR contributions to public good, rather than in their own interests (Scherer et al., 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). PCSR centers on "how firms shape their institutional environment, often driven by a concern for the public good" (Scherer et al., 2016, p. 273). PCSR understands the legitimacy of organizations as based on their communicative contributions to societies (e.g., Rasche, 2015; Scherer, 2018; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) as such conceptions of CSR focus on "the embedding of the corporation in democratic processes of defining rules and tackling global political challenges" (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, p. 1098). Such understandings should resonate with public relations scholars because they place communication at the foreground of organizational behavior. They are valuable for scholars embracing a civil society perspective because they speak to the potential for positive communicative contributions of organizations to societies.

Critics of PCSR (e.g., Banerjee, 2010, 2014; Monshipouri, Welch, & Kennedy, 2003) challenge its value because of a lack of institutional support and regulatory enforcement: Corporations often lack the motives to make a positive societal impact, only to *look* as if they are. That said, PCSR does point toward the possibility of dissensus as grounds for further research (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). While CSR "remains a corporate ideal, not evidence of societal improvement," even the act of such aspirational speech drive changing expectations and, potentially, more socially responsible actions (Stokes, 2016).

Each of these trends—toward social issue engagement, public deliberation, as well as broader conceptions of relationships and dialogue—set the stage for moving beyond consensus-based approaches to public relations theory. Organizations may face intractable scenarios with foes who would prefer they not exist. Collaboration may simply not be possible. The existing frameworks to examine organizational engagement in wicked problems (outlined above) still position alignment with publics as a crucial measure of success. If intractability is truly the core of this approach, the perspective of wicked problems should help focus theory development beyond a consensus-oriented paradigm. If contentious social issues and increasing expectations for public deliberation are a growing part of public relations, intractable problems may become even more central to theory and praxis in the field.

The next sections examine several additional approaches: first, theories that provide an openness to non-consensus approaches, and, finally, the perspectives of dissensus and agonistic dialogue. While the previous sections cover theories that position consensus as the primary goal of public relations, even when providing temporary space for other approaches, the theories outlined below allow for a more complete treatment of dissent, agonistic approaches, and perspectives of dissensus. Many of these frameworks embrace a critical or postmodern approach, allowing conflict to move closer to the center of examination.

### **Openness to Non-Consensus Outcomes**

Many scholars have identified the challenges in consensus-based approaches. Some have offered modifications to established frameworks to better incorporate a wider range of tactics, including those that constitute professional public relations

practice. Leichty (1997) posits that two situations are better suited to non-collaborative approaches: (1) high-conflict crises where the public relations function was forced into a reactive role, and (2) situations where “opponents are not always reasonable” (p. 50). While maintaining that symmetry and collaboration could be thought of as ideals, Leichty articulated a path a growing movement to add nuance to normative public relations scholarship.

Multiple theoretical thrusts have taken up this change, including conflict-based theories, contingency theory, complexity theory, coorientation, and narrative approaches. For example, Murphy (1991) explains that “successful conflict resolution must involve dyadic communication and bargaining behavior, rather than imposition of one side's beliefs on the other” (p. 118). She goes on to explain that such similarities and complexities make the work of public relations more nuanced than the symmetric/asymmetric dichotomy. The next topics—conflict, contingency theory, complexity theory, coorientation theory, and narrative theory—expand on this perspective.

**Mixed motives.** Moving beyond symmetrical solutions to address conflicts requires outlining mixed motives models. These require an acknowledgement of the power differential both inside and outside of the organization and an understanding of best practices beyond consensus-oriented approaches (Murphy, 1991; Plowman, 1998). According to Murphy (1991), “conflict and cooperation are themselves interdependent and one cannot change without affecting the other” (p. 117). This dichotomy underscores Plowman’s (2005) characterization of public relations as “full of paradoxes” (p. 132), as practitioners must confront sustained conflict and

negotiation, but maintain a state of being “unconditionally constructive” (p. 132) despite negativity. Thus, negotiation is central to his mixed motives approach. Plowman (1998) outlined five potential negotiation approaches: contending, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating (p. 245). These include a win-win scenario (collaborating), a lose-lose scenario (avoiding), and a situation where the other wins (accommodating). Such approaches are crucial to earning public relations a seat at the management table as part of the dominant coalition within organizations, which requires that practitioners master such skills and demonstrate their benefit to the organization (Plowman, 2005). This line of scholarship contextualizes public relations efforts regarding polarizing issues as part of public affairs and conflict resolution public relations practices (Plowman, 2017; Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2016). For Plowman (2007), the most effective practitioner posture is one of assertive pacifism or “humwillity”—a combination of humility and perseverance or will (p. 97). It emphasizes research and listening before action and working to solve challenges for all parties involved in conflict while still providing space for advocacy on behalf of organizations. In this way, it exemplifies an ethical mixed-motives approach to practice.

Mixed motive models have been examined in multiple contexts and from multiple epistemological perspectives, including game theory (Murphy, 1991), global public affairs (Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Zhang, 2010), a postmodernist investigation into public relations in South Africa (Holtzhausen, Peterson, & Tindall, 2003), and prosocial organizations (Brooks, Wakefield, & Plowman, 2018). Game theory provides a perspective that integrates conflict resolution and “winning” relative to an



organization's value system rather than against an adversary (Murphy, 1991, p. 118). Zhang's (2010) foreign policy analysis of a speech by President Barack Obama supported Grunig's (2001) assertion that asymmetrical tactics could exist within a symmetrical worldview. Examining the South African context, Holtzhausen et al. (2003) found that practitioners did not understand their work according to normative symmetrical principles. Instead practitioners "reflected a greater concern about the relationship between the organization and its publics and the effect of public relations practices on social justice" (p. 337). In a case study of "non-confrontational public relations" by a prosocial NGO, Brooks, Wakefield, and Plowman (2018, p. 139), which found that nurturing, "unconditionally constructive" approaches were beneficial in generating organizational engagement and interaction from non-active publics.

**Contingency theory.** Building on conflict management theory within the context of crisis communication, contingency theory serves as an additional perspective on the role of non-consensus outcomes. The theory posits that practitioners can act on a continuum from complete accommodation of external publics to complete advocacy for the organization, depending on the circumstances presented (Cancel et al., 1997; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). This perspective underscores that the challenges faced by practitioners are "far too complex for a single normative model for public relations practice" (Reber & Cameron, 2003, p. 431). Thus, contingency theory takes a positive approach, rather than a normative one.

A multitude of factors in contingency theory—87 in its original conception (Cancel et al., 1997) grouped into external and internal variables (Cancel et al., 1999)—contribute to organizational decision making regarding the degree of accommodation or advocacy. Accommodation may not be possible given six factors: (1) a moral conviction that an accommodative stance is unethical, (2) the need to maintain neutrality, (3) legal constraints, (4) regulatory restraints, (5) management restrictions, and (6) jurisdictional or negotiation issues (Cameron et al., 2001). Additionally, organizations may not be interested in mutual benefit with publics based on needing to maintain or reflect organizational identity, such as an anti-smoking organization refusing on principle not to negotiate with a cigarette manufacturer (Kim & Cameron, 2016). Within this framework, ethical communication in crises reflects situational intricacies, but maintains alignment “with the organization’s vision, mission, and core values” (Jin, Pang, & Cameron, 2018, p. 49). Contingency theory lays the groundwork for understanding why organizations may reasonably not want to engage or advocate “in both potentially negative and potentially positive situations” (Cancel et al., 1999, pp. 192-193). It explains that symmetrical approaches to public relations may undervalue the importance of power differentials among organizations (Cancel et al., 1997).

Several relevant findings from this research stream include the identification of *repugnant publics* and the recognition that organizations may not want to compromise or even communicate with them (Cancel et al., 1999). The role of the dominant coalition is crucial in determining if, how, and when an organization may respond during a contentious issue situation (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010), as well as

the potential for intra-organizational conflict (Pang, Cropp, & Cameron, 2006). Accommodation may not be feasible when multiple publics have conflicting interests—making it impossible for organizations to accommodate one without damaging the relationship with another (Cancel et al., 1999). Additionally, an organization’s identity and the strength of its definition has been shown to play a crucial role in organizational behavior relative to contentious issues—in this case, in an experimental design utilizing latent publics and activist organizations (Kim & Cameron, 2016). Relevant future research ideas proposed within the contingency framework include additional replication and expansion to cover broader publics, work “to explain the differences between how corporations make community relations decisions and how they make decisions about more potentially negative external publics” (Cancel et al., 1999, p. 193). Social issues management and a greater focus on intractable, dissensual scenarios may provide insights into such questions.

**Complexity theory.** Research utilizing complexity theory (and drawing from chaos theory) provides a change-centric framework that looks beyond normative, two-way symmetrical approaches and one-to-one organization-public understandings (Gower, 2006; Murphy, 2000). Murphy (2010) outlined five features of complexity theory of use to public relations scholarship: “adaptivity, nonlinearity, coevolution, punctuated equilibrium, and self-organization” (p. 447). *Adaptivity* reflects the vast capacity for continuous change among organizations within their environments. *Nonlinearity* refers to scholars’ inability to pinpoint causation in public relations praxis, largely due to the complexity of systems and the number of variables outside

of our control. *Coevolution* points to the inextricability of organizations from among other organizations and publics: Change happens in a multitude of responses among interrelated systems rather than an isolated organizational decision making.

*Punctuated equilibrium*, adapted from evolutionary theory, speaks to the often uneven rate of change within systems—which may stall (or appear stable) for long periods of time before a period of rapid transformation. Finally, *self organization* speaks to the ability of systems to change themselves through the accumulated actions of their members. By contrast, she classifies symmetry/excellence theory as “oriented toward stability, if not permanence, because it seeks to create and maintain relationships that balance self-interest with the interests of others” (p. 448).

Complexity and chaos theories have taken root most deeply in crisis communication research (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2006, 2010a; Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016; Liu & Fraustino, 2014; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ullmer, 2002). Reputation-based crisis theories such as SCCT focus on the organizational perspective as the most important goal and presume that publics will respond in predictable ways to certain situations (Coombs, 2007). Yet, crises have been noted for their unpredictability and unanticipated outcomes (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Issues (crises and otherwise) maintain their intractability because “a system’s evolution unfurls from its prior history” (Murphy, 2000, p. 232), maintaining its trajectory as it moves forward. Such momentum is often the result of a multitude of individual actors whose accumulated actions create patterns in society more broadly (Murphy, 2000). Sellnow and Seeger (2013) present chaos theory as a metatheory or “principles about how complex systems behave, including how they collapse and recover” (p. 108), which can make

it a useful framework for understanding and coping with crises (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008).

Murphy (2000) addressed *wicked problems* directly, asking “how, then, does one deal with ‘wicked problems,’ with a shifting cast of characters, a plethora of variables, some of which may be influential and some not, and a not-always-clear organizational objective? One way is to explore a theoretical approach that creates a central place for uncertainty and multiple variables” (p. 450). Empirical research in their vein has, for example, questioned public relations practitioners’ ability to control external environments (Murphy, 2000). *Bifurcation* (or the accumulation of changes, inconsistencies, and imperfections) in complex systems leads to their unpredictability (Murphy, 2010). Put simply, “complex systems resist management by outside influences” (p. 214). For all of these reasons, Murphy (2000) encourages public relations scholars to be critical of theories “oriented toward stability” (p. 448) and engage with those that help practitioners capture and digest the irreducible complexity of systems in constant change. In the context of this research project, complexity theories remind us that both organizations and publics are adaptive, irrational, and inconsistent (Murphy, 2000).

**Coorientation theory.** Coorientation theory provides an additional perspective on non-consensus-based approaches to practice. Newcomb’s (1953, 1956) original coorientation model was grounded in social psychology as a way to evaluate the respective orientations of two communicators toward each other or external objects. It was integrated into public relations by Broom (1977) as a way to identify gaps and issue misunderstandings among organizations and publics, becoming a “tool

for measuring coordination on public issues” (Pearson, 1989, p. 78). Newcomb emphasized the phrase “strain toward symmetry” (1953, p. 395) to understand the innate pull or tug toward agreement that serves as the basis for coorientation between individuals (Bentley, 2015). Utilizing this one-to-one approach requires an understanding of (1) the organizational perspective on the public, (2) the public’s perspective on the organization, (3) the organization’s perception of the public’s perspective, and (4) the public’s perception of the organization’s perspective (Broom & Dozier, 1990). In this way, coorientation can contribute to issue identification as part of an issues management approach (Broom, 1977) as well as provide more nuanced, measurable understandings of relationships than standard OPR approaches, particularly for understanding challenging relationships (Seltzer, 2007).

Broom and Dozier (1990) proposed four states of coorientation between an organization and a public: *true consensus*, *dissensus* (Pearson, 1989), *false consensus*, and *false conflict*. The first two states occur when an organization and a public understand that they hold views in agreement or in opposition, respectively, on a given issue. The false states occur when one or both sides misconstrue the other’s position, resulting in the perception of disagreement or agreement when it does not exist. For practitioners, this means measuring internal and external perceptions of issues—not only measuring publics—in order to fully comprehend the organizational environment (Dozier & Ehling, 1992). In this way, coorientation theory serves as a particularly useful tool in identifying and addressing such instances of misperception (Cancel et al., 1997; Seltzer, 2007).

More recent research in public relations using coorientation theory has included deepening investigation into the effectiveness of pseudo-apologies (Bentley, 2015), more nuanced methods for OPR measurement (Seltzer, 2007), international public relations and national identity (Taylor & Kent, 2006; D. Verčič & A. T. Verčič, 2007), discrepancies in understandings of professionalism, (Park, 2003; Sallot, Cameron, & Lariscy, 1998), and the congruence of journalists and public relations practitioners (Avery, Lariscy, & Sweetser, 2010; A. T. Verčič & Colić, 2016). Generally, while such approaches have opened the door toward additional analysis, measurement, and understanding of dissensual relationships by acknowledging them as a normal condition, they still prioritize consensus as the desired end goal.

**Narrative theory.** Practitioners must manage their own identities and the identities of their organizations among other organizational stories (Fisher, 1984, 1987; Place, 2019b). Professionals must make meaning of their work within the context of larger narratives about the industry, organization, and community (Place, 2019b; Pressgrove, Janoske, & Madden, 2019). Narrative points toward the construction of a multitude of individual and local perspectives and stories, of heroines and villains, rather than selecting consensus as an ideal. In this sense, persuasion and advocacy are natural and crucial parts of our identification and action as humans and communicators (Fisher, 1984): Communicating as part of such narratives emphasizes sharing a specific, individual story and perspective as well as accepting that other individuals and organizations will have their own.

In public relations scholarship, this perspective includes, most notably, the *homo narrans* approach (Vasquez, 1993; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001), which envisions publics as rhetorical communities. It centers on the concept of symbolic convergence, individuals organizing their engagement with the context of *fantasies* or shared themes and perspectives, although there will always be multiple, competing understandings (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). Similarly, a semiotic approach prioritizes understanding of external meanings (publics' perspectives on issues), but emphasizes their distinctness from organizational perspectives (Botan & Soto, 1998). Unlimited semiosis, the ongoing meaning-making processes of individuals and, collectively, of publics, acts as a driver for convergences, as “fantasies become shared because, as unlimited semiosis suggests, each interpretive step generates in each interpreter the need to interpret further” (p. 38). As ideas and meanings evolve, the process of generative opinion or shared understanding among publics is ongoing and constantly shifting between bringing individuals together and, at the same time, pulling them apart. To fully embrace the multiplicity of voices, permutations, and perspectives inherent in the conflict of intractable problems, the next section incorporates two perspectives that move those facets to the foreground—dissensus and agonism.

### **Dissensus and Agonism**

As mentioned earlier, while management-focused research has often centered on achieving organizational ends (D. Verčič & J. Grunig, 2000) or mutually beneficial ends (Heath, 2006), postmodern scholarship in public relations has attempted to tackle the problems of uncertainty and disagreement in theory and practice. Modernist or positivist work in public relations includes “a focus on goals



and objectives or management-by-objectives, breaking down into more and more measurable parts the process through which public relations can achieve such outcomes as behavior change, but also change in awareness, comprehension, and attitudes” (Toth, 2002, p. 245). Curtin (2012) places relationship management and excellence paradigms within a post-positivist paradigm, as they reflect the human elements of organizational goals: measurable, but not universal or wholly objective. By contrast, “a postmodern perspective argues the ultimate goal may not be working toward agreement and reconciliation between an organization and its publics but rather toward an embrace of difference and disagreement” (Ciszek, 2016).

As society and communication become increasingly complex, the expectations governing organizational behaviors and responsibilities have muddled (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer, Palazzo, & Baumann, 2006). Heath and McComas (2015) explain that the challenges of modern society are not limited to traditional communities or bound within nation-states, but are often regional or global in scope (i.e. pollution, global warming, labor rights/social issues/human rights). In an increasingly unstable globalizing world, and with the challenges to legitimacy that this creates (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007), approaches that embrace postmodernism provide advantages for theory and praxis (Heath & McComas, 2015). Additionally, some organizations are focused on—or organized around—enacting social change rather than promoting stability (e.g., Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Derville, 2005; Stokes & Rubin, 2010). From this starting point, the next sections examine postmodern theories of dissensus and agonism.

**Dissensus.** Postmodern perspectives begin by rejecting one *truth* in favor of multiple *truths* of existence (Toth, 2002). In communicative contexts, this means an embrace of many potential meanings and many ends. Holtzhausen (2002) summarizes the postmodern project as a two-step process which (1) deconstructs the “language of management” (p. 252), and (2) provides or proposes actions that support tenants of inclusiveness, humanity, fairness, and equality across individuals of different race, gender, geography, socioeconomic position, or historical marginalization. Within such inequality of access, knowledge, and power lies the recognition of the importance of individual experiences, micropolitics, and dissensus (Holtzhausen, 2000).

Public relations scholars have focused on dissensual contexts in relation to contested social issues or wicked problems: “Public relations is enriched by a postmodern approach, recognizing dissensus as an important concept and consequence when organizations advocate on behalf of contested political and social issues” (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 116). In order to provide additional depth to this line of scholarship, the next section will examine dissensus through the work of French philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Rancière. These two perspectives have been the primary sources utilized by several scholars of public relations looking to integrate concepts beyond consensus into their work (e.g., Davidson, 2016; Holtzhausen, 2002; 2012; 2015; Macnamara, 2016).

Lyotard was a critic of neoliberalism and a leading voice of postmodernism. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), he defines postmodernism as an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (p. xxiv): the inability or unwillingness to accept the

overarching societal stories and belief structures that frame human experiences.

Through a process of reviewing a variety of language games—with each utterance defined as a move by one voice in a broader discourse—he underscores the inescapability of multiple narratives (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015).

Postmodernism embraces the importance of context (historical, cultural, societal, gendered, etc.), the imperative of an ethical responsible society, a fear of dominant and dominating ideologies, a resistance to positivist definitions of knowledge and knowledge producers, as well as a focus on immediate problems rather than an ideal state (Holtzhausen, 2000). Lyotard's work embraces multiple facets of this project, with a particular focus on dissensus (Toth, 2002).

Lyotard sets up a distinction between positivist knowledge or scientific knowledge and narrative or critical knowledge. The debate between these two poles is “governed by the demand for legitimation” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 27). Scientific thinking questions the validity of narrative statements, which it characterizes as “savage, primitive, underdeveloped, backward, alienated, composed of opinions, customs, authority, prejudice, ignorance, ideology” (p. 27). Echoing Kuhn (1970), he positions scientific discourse not as a separate stream of knowledge, but as wholly reliant upon societal narratives for its influence. The power within the legitimation process is held by those who have a say as to what constitutes knowledge. The dominant “games,” reflect discourses of power and neoliberal capitalism, for which science has, from his perspective, become a tool: “The games of scientific language become the games of the rich, in which whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right. An equation between wealth, efficiency, and truth is thus established” (Lyotard, 1984, p.

45). Such a perspective is reflected in public relations scholarship highlighting the role of power and the outsized contributions powerful organizational voices make to societies and cultures (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). Thus, for Lyotard, the most just approach returns value to the “little narrative” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 60)—the local understanding—rather than the grand narratives characteristic of Enlightenment, modernist discourse.

Within this context, Lyotard (1984) raised the importance of dissensus: “Consensus has become an outmoded and suspect value. But justice as a value is neither outmoded nor suspect. We must thus arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus” (p. 66). Therefore, ethical approaches are not necessarily based on consensus or symmetry. Consensus is only useful when it is temporary and limited—bound by geography, community, and time:

Any consensus on the rules defining the game and the ‘moves’ playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. The orientation then favors a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments, by which I mean argumentation that concerns metaprescriptives and is limited in space and time (p. 66).

For public relations, this speaks to the situational nature not only of publics themselves, but of resolution or consensus. In contrast to foundational issues management literature that implies a *dormant* or resolved issue state, Lyotard’s understanding of dissensus mirrors Coombs and Holladay’s (2018) *social issues management* approach in that they both speak to a lack of resolution or inability to resolve societal problems.

Beyond Lyotard's work, *dissensus* has been defined in several ways. Rancière distinguishes his work from Lyotard by saying that democracy is grounded in dissensus, rather than consensus. In contrast to Habermas (1991), who sees the ideal functioning of society through the separation of public and private spheres, Rancière (2010) sees dissensus as the "essence of politics" (p. 38): The multiplicity of voices and ideas resulting from the collision of personal and public spaces. He illustrates this point with examples of political protest and the inherent invisibility of privilege: "A dissensus is not a conflict of interests, opinions or values; it is a division inserted in 'common sense': a dispute over what is given and about the frame within which we see something as given" (p. 69). For Rancière, consensus means closing spaces to conflict and "patching up gaps between appearance and reality" (p. 71), which can have potentially beneficial outcomes, but more often reinforce existing inequalities. Dissensual understandings of politics and political discourse emphasize the discomfort of addressing new understandings of reality or lived experience. It can be guttural and wrenching:

Dissensus is a conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or 'bodies'. This is the way in which dissensus can be said to reside at the heart of politics, since at bottom the latter itself consists in an activity that redraws the frame within which common objects are determined. (p. 139)

A consensus understanding "evacuates the political core" of a community by removing the inherent, healthy conflict within it (p. 189). In this way, he presents the

core challenge to consensus: its inability to be truly inclusive in understanding the needs of diverse publics, particularly in situations of conflict.

***Dissensus in public relations practice.*** In public relations scholarship, Ciszek and Logan (2018) described dissensus as “the reverse of consensus, where unanimity is not required nor the goal of communication” (p. 117). Rather than positioning organization-public consensus as the ultimate end, it means “that practitioners might be better off realizing that publics may not agree and that such disagreement may be informative and productive” (Ciszek, 2016, p. 316). Using this perspective, I define dissensus as the discordant, polarized state that exists among societal actors (individuals and organizations) in response to, for example, wicked or intractable problems. It occurs when multiple, irreconcilable stances on an issue coexist. Parties in such disagreements can either publicly communicate these sentiments or hold them privately. Dissensus is value neutral. It may provide opportunities for temporarily reshaping power relationships among participants. A dissensual perspective allows public relations practitioners to be fully aware of this spectrum of viewpoints and tensions that exist among individuals and organizations.

Just as public relations, as a scholarly discipline, is strongest when drawing from diverse perspectives on scholarship (Toth, 2010), the co-creation of knowledge and legitimacy for organizations should center on a willingness to embrace multiple perspectives, multiple modes of inquiry, and varied understandings of justice. Ethics are enhanced by examining multiple ways of knowing, particularly when confronting cultural boundaries and issues of unequal power among organizations and nations

(Kennedy, Xu, & Sommerfeldt, 2016). Public relations' effects must be measured in relation to the organization as well as within society (Edwards, 2018).

Postmodern perspectives such as dissensus can provide practical guidance and “cash value” for practitioners if they retain some conception of effectiveness of the public relations function—even if that conception embraces societal and community understandings and goes beyond what most practitioners see as the impact of their work (Toth, 2002, p. 247). Ciszek (2016) outlines three opportunities and four questions for practitioners looking to practice dissensus. The opportunities include the ability to better appreciate publics' understandings of issues, the generation of new questions to improve practices and communication, and the formulation of new approaches to digital interactions. In sum, they represent opportunities for organizations to learn through listening and appreciating different understandings and external perspectives. By contrast, Ciszek's questions serve as points of caution for practitioners and organizations looking to engage in dissensus approaches, including taking stock of (1) whether specific circumstances are appropriate to deploy such an approach, (2) how to manage potential disagreement among publics and the organization, (3) how to manage potential disagreement between practitioners and the managing coalition, and (4) how dissensus itself challenges professional ethics, including norms and values. Dissensus perspectives move practitioners toward uncertainty and ambiguity, giving up control, and emergence over planning.

Additionally, dissensus/consensus need not be understood as a dichotomy: There is a continuum from pure dissensus to pure consensus, with many gradations in between, as explored in public relations scholarship on activism (Madden, Janoske,

Briones, & Harpole, 2018). In a case study of radical activism and culture jamming, Madden et al. examined how FORCE, a Baltimore-based nonprofit feminist group, subverted Victoria's Secret digital content to confront them about the company's tacit endorsement of rape culture. Yet, the activists "do not see the existence of Victoria's Secret as incompatible with the goals of disrupting rape culture, instead preferring to use the brand as a powerful tool with influence over a large population" (p. 180). This demonstrates the potential value of dissensus-driven tactics, such as culture jamming, to raise opinion and awareness about issues—even if the goal is not to destroy the adversary.

This is complicated by the fact that activism—as a source of dissensus—can be difficult to pinpoint as internal or external: For many organizations, there is no clear line of definition. Shareholder activism (Ragas, 2013; Uysal, 2014; Uysal & Tsetsura, 2015; Yang, Uysal, & Taylor, 2018), internal or employee activism (McCown, 2007), and public relations practitioners as activists (e.g., Holtzhausen, 2012; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) are three examples of this dilemma. Activists may seek to gain a foothold in public discourse about an issue (Ragas, 2013), or push organizations toward pro-social outcomes or activities (Uysal, 2014; Yang, Uysal, & Taylor, 2018). Such internal frictions can contribute to intractability within organizations.

There is significant potential benefit in public relations practitioners taking dissensus perspectives that invite divergent publics' opinions and values, rather than aiming to quiet disagreement (Holtzhausen, 2012). This has already led to productive scholarship in public relations: For example Ciszek and Logan (2018) note that



“dissensus serves as a theoretical disruption in dialogic theorizing, an intervention aimed at illuminating agonistic interactions and the communicative realities and challenges that occur in digital spaces” (p. 124). Applying this concept gives scholars and practitioners tools for seeing productive outcomes from the entrenched disagreement of wicked problems.

**Agonism.** A related strain of confrontational or non-consensus-based theory centers on *agonism*, which has histories in dialogic, rhetorical, and deliberative scholarship. Agonism is about the “playful and competitive space” where multiple opinions and perspectives can coexist (Roberts-Miller, 2002, p. 588). Rather than being counterproductive, “antagonistic discourses may be the first step toward dialogic communication and social change” (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 125). Particularly as communication technology drives “fragmentation rather than cohesion,” agonism and agonistic pluralism provide a potentially redemptive discursive path (Edwards, 2018, p. 113). In contrast to dissensus, which emphasizes disagreement as a state of being, agonism describes the underlying discursive processes involved in intractable or wicked problems.

Ganesh and Zoller (2012) explain *agonism* as one of three types of dialogic approaches, alongside *collaboration* and *co-optation*. With Bohm (2006) and Buber (1958) as its leading thinkers, *collaboration* privileges consensus, collaboration, equality, and mutual trust as part of interpersonal dialogic interactions. It emphasizes an appreciation for and aspiration to understand *the other* (Cissna & Anderson, 1994), as well as a cooperative, non-adversarial, and non-persuasive perspective (Foss & Griffin, 1995). A critical or skeptical *co-optation* approach emphasizes dialogue’s

fragility and potential for misuse (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). This approach asks whether genuine dialogue is possible, or if the concept of dialogue has been misrepresented: “Arguably, the very fact that dialogue is normative and is construed as a warm and friendly democratic ideal lends itself to the possibility of it being used to legitimize and present corporate and business interests as the public good” (p. 75). This mirrors scholarship in public relations that questions uses of dialogue in practice (e.g., Lane, 2018; Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2016; Stoker & Tusinski, 2006; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Almost by definition, collaborative dialogue cannot be mandated or forced upon organizations (Lane, 2018). Thus, forcing organizations to use dialogue is co-optation by the governmental or regulatory body making the claim.

Finally, agonism as a dialogic approach prioritizes the conflict within social change (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). Rather than seeing such approaches as purely negative, agonistic perspectives understand antagonistic discourse as a value-neutral and natural part of democratic existence. Scholarship in this vein draws on the work of Bakhtin (1981) and others emphasizing the inherent multivocality of language and meaning (Capizzo, 2018). It adds value by “highlighting shifting relationships of power, identity, and vulnerability, while simultaneously paying explicit attention to questions of justice and social and material needs” (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p. 77). In these ways, agonistic dialogue opens the door for broader understandings of public relations dialogue and engagement, and is particularly well suited to examine activist organizations and controversial issues (Ciszek & Logan, 2018).

Another strain of agonistic literature in public relations comes from theories of agonistic democracy and deliberative rhetoric. For Davidson (2016), this means the elevation of “permanent contest, dissensus and performance in vibrant public spaces which expose and test the legitimacy of those who hold power and privilege” (p. 147). This privilege rests in the ability to define what types of narratives are accepted within mainstream discourses (Fraser, 1990). Roberts-Miller (2002) emphasizes the inclusion of discourses such as myths, stories, and personal narratives, beyond a Habermasian focus on rationality, to broaden conversations and access through agonism. She utilizes Hannah Arendt’s version of *polemical agonism* to distinguish it from approaches aimed at deliberation toward consensus (or *persuasive agonism*). This process entails substantive debate over at least two interactions: The first to create and clarify the argument itself, the second to “make public one’s thought in order to test it” (p. 595). This positions the act of public presentation as akin to replicability in scientific research.

Rather than a deliberative understanding of persuasive argumentation that envisions the best idea winning—such as Heath’s (2001) “wrangle in the marketplace”—it is about generating the best-possible argument, not the most persuasive. Roberts-Miller (2002) states that “agonism demands that one simultaneously trust and doubt one's own perceptions, rely on one's own judgment and consider the judgments of others, think for oneself and imagine how others think” (p. 597). For organizations, which generally begin difficult conversations holding power over their publics, *polemical agonism* serves as an ethical and healthy description of part of the public relations function. She describes the value in

Arendt's perspective on agonism as "fact-based but not positivist, communally grounded but not relativist, adversarial but not violent, independent but not expressivist" (p. 598). In public relations praxis, this approach positions practitioners as "custodians of discourse" (Ciszek, 2016, p. 319), protecting pluralistic communication in the public sphere rather than just acting as organizational advocates.

Davidson and Motion (2018) draw on the work of Chantal Mouffe to examine this central role of agonism and antagonism in the public sphere. Mouffe, a Belgian political theorist interested in counter-hegemonic discourses, positions these concepts in contrast to deliberative or dialogic perspective: "Liberal and communitarian thinkers do generally realize the difficulties in achieving universal consensus, but nonetheless, maintain its existence as a regulatory concept in their theorizing – whereas Mouffe resolutely does not" (p. 397). For Mouffe (1999), the crisis of legitimacy in western democracies stems from erosion of trust in deliberative institutions. Rather than embracing the *communicative rationality* of a Habermasian viewpoint (e.g., Habermas, 1996), she acknowledges "that taking pluralism seriously requires that we give up on the dream of a rational consensus" (p. 752). As power is inherent in social identities and social life, deliberative systems Thus, *agonistic pluralism* describes a reconstitution of political disagreement by emphasizing ongoing conflict within a space of tolerance (Davidson & Motion, 2018). She distinguishes *adversary* from *enemy*—the former a worthy opponent and the latter a nemesis to be defeated at any cost (Mouffe, 1999). Thus, communicating with adversaries constitutes *agonism*, while engaging with enemies reflects *antagonism*.

This framework reinforces the centrality and inevitability of conflict without either glossing over its challenges or losing all sense of potential progress. In a political context,

the ideal of a pluralist democracy cannot be to reach a rational consensus in the public sphere. Such a consensus cannot exist. We have to accept that every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion. The idea that power could be dissolved through a rational debate and that legitimacy could be based on pure rationality are illusions, which can endanger democratic institutions. (Mouffe, 1999, p. 758)

Organizations cannot exist outside of this political realm, and intractable issues or wicked problems present increasingly acute challenges for public relations practices and practitioners.

In sum, agonism provides a contrast to consensus-driven communication practices and processes (such as Buberian dialogue) by offering a focus on realistic understandings of conflict. For public relations, a conception of *polemical agonism* as a staged process underscores 1) the thoughtful development of opinions and perspectives with external influence and 2) an approach to engaging with publics that takes into account power differentials. For practitioners, this provides a template to enact a productive agonistic approach, including a deep understanding and full inclusion of external perspectives (Toth, 2002) as well as an acknowledgement and incorporation of power as it may impact complex networks of relationships as part of engagement (Saffer, Yang, & Taylor, 2018). *Agonistic pluralism* provides a

framework for public relations practitioners to thoughtfully engage with a wide variety of adversaries without devolving into pure antagonism (Davidson & Motion, 2018). The final section in this literature review will examine additional hurdles to practitioner implementation of such concepts: metrics, measurement, and evaluation.

### **Measurement and Evaluation**

One significant structural challenge to the widespread acceptance of dissensus or agonism within public relations practice is the difficulty of such concepts to fit neatly within the quantitative, metrics-driven management framework favored by organizational leaders and professional communication associations. Practitioners should perform research and plan ongoing measurement and evaluation approaches prior to executing public relations programs (Broom & Sha, 2013). Therefore, if public relations practitioners are to see beyond consensus outcomes, they need access to broader conceptions of effectiveness and the tools to evaluate them. As Toth (2002) explains, “just as postmodern theorists would agree that there are different postmodernisms, I would argue that there are different definitions of ‘organizational and public relations effectiveness’ (p. 248). This section seeks to provide an overview of prevalent measurement approaches, but also points toward additional frameworks that may allow for more scanning, listening, and flexibility in assessment.

Public relations scholarship has examined several approaches to measurement and evaluation, led by a largely positivist epistemology with strict planning and guidelines in the context of a campaign. Measurement and evaluation should be separate approaches and move beyond purely qualitative understandings

(Macnamara, 2015). *Measurement* is defined as taking measures or collecting data, while *evaluation* relates to data used to make an assessment of effectiveness:

Measurement is part of the process of evaluation, but, on its own, measurement provides only raw statistics (metrics) and descriptions. Measures can be meaningless without interpretation and context. Evaluation involves making judgements about the value and significance of findings and results within a context. (Macnamara, 2018a, p. 24)

Standardization in measurement and evaluation has been put forth as a key to practitioners and management acceptance of public relations' value (Michaelson, Wright, & Stacks, 2012). Within this conception, public relations *goals* are broad aspirations for the campaign, while *objectives* are the measurable outcomes that lead, collectively, toward these goals (Stacks, 2007). *Objectives* should define an audience; an attainable, measurable desired change in awareness, opinion, or behavior among that group; a timeframe for completion; and clear relevance to organizational goals (Broom & Sha, 2013). *Strategies* and *tactics* select the approaches/channels and activities (respectively) best suited to create the change that meets the objectives at hand. Additionally, public relations scholars and practitioners should understand the distinction between evaluating public relations programs themselves and evaluating "the overall contribution of the public relations function to organizational effectiveness" (J. Grunig, 2006, p. 158).

In a campaign context, research takes three phases: developmental, refinement, and evaluation (Stacks, 2010). Developmental research, taking place prior to campaign implementation, generates baselines or benchmarks in order to set

objectives (and expectations) for campaign success. This is often a publics-focused stage: The excellence study demonstrated that an organization must “behave in ways that solves the problems and satisfies the goals of stakeholders as well as of management,” and developmental research is a key point of entry (J. Grunig, 2006, p. 159). Refinement research goes on during the campaign itself and reflects the potential for ongoing changes in strategies and tactics to more efficiently or effectively meet objectives (Michaelson, Wright, & Stacks, 2012). Finally, evaluation research occurs at the end of a campaign to identify whether and how communication has met its objectives as well as helped the organization meet its objectives. It also considers the relevance of those objectives to communication and organizational goals. This involves “correlating measures of public relations outcomes with business outcomes” to understand both relevance and return-on-investment for campaign tactics and activities (p. 5). In the public communication literature, similar three-stage approaches have been defined as *formative* evaluation, *process* evaluation, and *summative* or outcome evaluation, emphasizing the importance of context and analysis at each step (e.g., Rice & Atkin, 2013, p. 13).

Yet, there are significant challenges to this seemingly straightforward approach. There are many false or problematic metrics, ranging from the questionable value of counting *reach* or *impressions* to the “nefarious” advertising value equivalency (AVE) of media relations reporting (Macnamara, 2018a, p. 26). Even the broadly used marketing term return-on-investment (ROI) easily becomes problematic as many public relations practices and programs do not emphasize short-term financial returns (Watson & Zerfass, 2011). Additionally, most accepted and



functioning metrics are effective at measuring the success of public relations programs (and variables such as awareness, opinion change, or behavior change), but less so when faced with organizational- or societal-level questions (Likely & Watson, 2013; Macnamara, 2014). For example, campaigns have consequences beyond the narrow organizational objectives they are intended to accomplish, including the “unexpected, unintended, or unwanted public relations outcomes” many standard measurement and evaluation approaches and metrics may miss (Murphy, 2000, p. 456).

Additionally, there is the significant issue of practitioners ignoring or avoiding much of the advice of PRSA, the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), and other leading organizations and continuing to use primarily informal methods (Macnamara, 2015). This points toward a need for more practical measurement and evaluation approaches that incorporate broader and less organizationally centered metrics, as well as qualitative data (Macnamara, 2018a). While scholars have privileged relational approaches, few metrics exist that examine relationship quality for praxis. Alternative approaches to understanding both the issues at hand and their measurement provide additional understandings for a plurality of goals. For example, relationship strength (such as in OPR and excellence-based approaches), public opinion (as used in issues management), or awareness all measure progress toward organizational goals that dictate consensus outcomes as preferable, rather than incorporating alternative conceptions of success.

**Alternative approaches to measurement and evaluation.** Moving measurement beyond consensus-based approaches involves incorporating extra-organizational understandings of possible and desirable outcomes. If organizations set objectives and base their understandings of success solely on achieving them, it predisposes them to a myopic understanding of their impacts on communities and stakeholders. Scholars and practitioners know that there are unintended consequences to organizational actions (Murphy, 2000), and a more holistic approach to evaluation can help practitioners and managers understand them. Rittel and Webber's (1973) development of the concept of *wicked problems* in management literature could be understood, in part, as a reaction to the limitations of a management-by-objectives approach (see Greenwood, 1981), particularly in regards to dealing with contentious social issues:

In a setting in which a plurality of publics is politically pursuing a diversity of goals, how is the larger society to deal with its wicked problems in a planful way? How are goals to be set, when the valuative bases are so diverse? Surely a unitary conception of a unitary "public welfare" is an anachronistic one.

(Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 168)

In short, what succeeds for one group within society may spell tragedy for another. In this way, the authors question positivist assumptions that drive decision making, placing additional weight on contextually crafted solutions, "widened differentiation," and "non-zero-sum" approaches to problem solving (p. 168). Initial steps to retrofit dominant measurement and evaluation methods have presented some beneficial alternatives. For example, "balanced scorecards" have emerged to encourage

practitioners to measure beyond the immediate communicative impacts of campaigns by including financial/organization and socio-political factors in tracking success (Macnamara, 2018a; Zerfass, 2008). They encourage shifting the perspective of evaluation from program-level objectives, such as changes in awareness, opinion, or behavior (Broom & Sha, 2013) to organizational objectives, including those of corporate citizenship that reach into communities (Zerfass, 2008). Yet, such approaches do not provide the tools necessary to fully embrace the diversity of publics or perspectives in dissensual scenarios. This necessitates an embrace of rigorous qualitative research, as well as continuous improvement and contextualization of quantitative approaches (Macnamara, 2014).

The concept of listening provides a theoretically fertile ground from which to build such a holistic approach (Place, 2019a). There are a variety of relevant listening skills, including discriminatory listening, comprehensive listening, therapeutic listening, and critical listening (Wolvin, 2010a). Discriminatory listening involves prioritizing messages and information to understand what to listen to, as we cannot listen to everything equally. Comprehensive listening is the process of focusing fully on a message deemed important to understand its content. “Higher order” listening skills (p. 20), therapeutic and critical listening provide the listener with the ability to use listening as a tool to understand and support others as well as to consider the acceptability or credibility of a speaker and their message. The work of Jim Macnamara (2016a, 2016b, 2018a, 2018b) and Katie Place (2019a) on measurement, evaluation, and organizational listening has begun to outline crucial alternatives to help organizations create *architectures of listening* and to address the chronic

organizational issues of overwhelming data and little context or meaning. A listening-centric approach provides a strong rationale for holistic understandings of organizational success: “Listeners have an ethical responsibility to engage fully as listening communicators” (Wolvin, 2010b, p. 179), meaning they must listen to themselves and listen to others. In this way, they can better understand both the needs of others and the filters through which they respond to others.

Macnamara’s approach to listening (2016b) directly addresses Rittel and Webber’s (1973) understanding of *wicked problems* as multifaceted, complex, and socially centered, positioning large-scale listening as a tool for organizations to help bridge the gap between positivist solutions and more holistic understandings of publics, communities, and societies. He emphasizes building an architecture of listening through relationships across organizations, as professionals in customer relations, public relations, marketing, and other functions all have a role to play (Macnamara, 2018b). When taken seriously by relevant parties within an organization, many existing functions and approaches can be effective conduits for listening.

This perspective posits eight overlapping elements necessary to create such an architecture: *culture, politics, policies, structures and processes, technologies, resources, skills, and articulation* (Macnamara, 2016a). First, organizations must create a *culture* of openness to listening. Macnamara points to Rancière (1998) in making the case that a culture of listening is about paying attention to diverse opinions and perspectives, expanding the conception of who counts as valued speakers within and outside the organization (e.g., Place, 2019a; Wolvin, 2010b).

Second, addressing inequalities of power is at the center of the *politics* of listening. Understanding gaps in recognition, particularly for marginalized groups, serves as a critical step in expanding conversations and understandings. Third and fourth are *policies*, as well as *structures and processes*. These may include suggestion boxes (traditional and digital), community liaisons and advisory boards, ombuds, or more formal customer or community engagement summits (see p. 124).

While such pieces to the puzzle might seem insignificant on their own, they work to institutionalize listening procedures, create efficient processes for collecting data, and demonstrate organizational investment, which helps to build the culture of listening. *Technology, resources, and skills* are the fifth, sixth, and seventh elements, reflecting the need for necessary tools, human and financial assets, and expertise to effectively capture, interpret and act on the data gathered through listening processes. Finally, *articulation* of learnings represents the eighth element. The significant challenge is often not the collection of such data, but its synthesis across multiple channels and translation into recommendations for decisions and policies. Macnamara (2016b, 2018b) emphasizes that the *architecture* itself should vary from organization to organization, reflecting the distinct stakeholders, publics, and communities they serve.

Additional research has demonstrated that communities benefit when organizations prioritize their terminology to describe issues and concerns (Place, 2019a). Listening must go beyond active publics to understand the organizational contest from a holistic, sense-making perspective: “Only by letting publics speak in their own terms can we begin to understand *their* concerns and issues, not just their

responses to *our* concerns and agendas” (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006, p. 293). Such an architecture of listening cannot be enacted without a pervasive culture of listening, as Place (2019a) examined in an agency context. Her work demonstrated that structured listening practices improve client relationships, strategic decision-making, and agency success, but also pointed toward some of the difficulties in implementing such practice in non-agency settings.

Most dominant evaluation approaches center on a pre-post test method: Measurement to establish a baseline followed by additional measurement to determine the degree of change (Macnamara, 2018a). This means that practitioners act as the data gatherers, data analysts, and data reporters of their own success or failure (Macnamara, 2015). When measurement primarily looks backward, it opens the door for biased analyses and avoids opportunities to deepen understandings of publics, communities, and societies. Emerging models, such as AMEC’s measurement-analysis-insights-evaluation (MAIE) model emphasize forward-looking analysis: “Rather than trying to link communication to business or organizational outcomes retrospectively, which can be seen as *post hoc* rationalization, this approach produces positive contributions to the future success of the organization” (Macnamara, 2018a, p. 105). This approach emphasizes the stages of deep *analysis* (based on thorough measurement), which informs both evaluation (including program-related findings), and *insights* to inform future organizational strategies (Macnamara, 2015). Overcoming the barrier of a pre-post test mindset involves looking to a different perspective for measurement; one that can provide additional flexibility and openness to the complexities of intractable problems.

***Agile measurement.*** Another challenge for existing measurement approaches is the rigidity of the current planning approach. For example, the formulation of objectives prior to campaign implementation limits the ability to update, respond, and change direction as outreach progresses. This lack of flexibility presents a problem when practitioners are faced with *wicked problems* or the back-and-forth of agonistic or deeply contested issues. While measurable goals are a cornerstone of communication evaluation (Macnamara, 2018a), prioritizing them over other measurements and locking campaigns into a single direction handcuffs practitioners to their original perspective. One approach to campaigns and evaluation that may provide insights to overcoming such rigidity is the agile planning method demonstrated by Betteke van Ruler's (2014, 2015) reflective communication scrum model. This approach, adapted from information technology and software design, prioritizes flexibility in managing complex tasks, and short, focused "sprints" or "iterations" of activity lasting from several days to several weeks (van Ruler, 2015, p. 192). Rather than positioning evaluation primarily as the final phase of a campaign, the scrum approach sees the importance of evaluating each short burst of activity and outreach, and integrating the findings immediately into the next stage. In this way, agility provides a mechanism to prioritize formative evaluation (or goal-free evaluation), rather than having "tunnel vision" toward goals, a common consequence of summative evaluation typical at the end of traditional campaigns (p. 191).

***Agonistic metrics.*** In response to agonistic pluralism, a lens on organizational engagement that centers on conflict and tolerance of dissenting opinions, Davidson and Motion (2018) propose an understanding of public relations measurement

reflective of the extra-organizational responsibilities of this perspective. What they term *agonistic metrics* “would seek evidence that public relations activity had energized issue publics and encouraged civic participation” (p. 407). This would be done in addition to measuring consensus-focused outcomes, but would drive a reprioritization away from organization-centered opinion and behavioral change as the primary objectives, and toward fostering “enthusiasm for sharing spaces and exchanging views” as well as minimizing or removing barriers for participation, particularly for disadvantaged groups (p. 408). This reinforces a shift beyond organizational metrics and examining methods of tracing societal impact. Such measurement reorientation may seem naively optimistic, but such approaches to external social progress have already taken root, for example, in CSR theory and praxis (Dodd, 2018; Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018). From this perspective, contributions to agonistic pluralism may help public relations measure its impact beyond consensus outcomes.

In sum, managing dissensus and productively engaging in *wicked problems* on behalf of organizations means understanding and valuing the emergent nature of public relations (Winkler & Etter, 2018). Dominant measurement and evaluation approaches have, for important scientific and historical reasons, emphasized standardization and rigidity. Yet, the increasing speed and complexity of information exchange (Castells, 2008) and growing frequency of intractable problems (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) requires a broadening of our perspectives. The valuing of organizational listening, the re-prioritization of formative evaluation in the reflective communication scrum model (van Ruler, 2014, 2015), and the embrace of metrics



beyond the organization (Zerfass, 2008) are crucial to open doors for wider understandings of public relations effectiveness.

### **Research questions**

Public relations scholarship has been dominated by perspectives that position consensus as the goal of the ultimate public relations function, including relational approaches such as OPR (e.g., Broom, Casey, & Richey, 1997; Ferguson, 2018; Heath, 2013; Ledingham, 2006), dialogic perspectives (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012), and issues-centric perspectives such as issues management (e.g., Chase, 1984; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Taylor, Vasquez, & Doorley, 2003) and CSR (e.g., Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018; Scherer, 2018; Seele & Lock, 2015). Yet, such approaches make it difficult to account for the full range of practitioner activities that move into the realm of agonism and antagonism. Approaches such as chaos and complexity (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2008; Murphy, 2000, 2010; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ullmer, 2002), negotiation (e.g., Brooks, Wakefield, & Plowman, 2018; Plowman, 2005, 2007), coorientation (e.g., Avery, Lariscy, & Sweetser, 2010; Seltzer, 2007; A. T. Verčič & Colić, 2018), and narrative theory (Pressgrove, Janoske, & Madden, 2019; Winkler & Etter, 2018) emphasize the fundamental inability for organizations to impose their perspective on others, necessitating an acceptance of space for others. Dissensus and agonism offer approaches that position the acceptance of multiple perspectives and narratives at the center of analysis.

Several scholars have pointed toward the need for a clearer understanding of dissensus in public relations (e.g., Ciszek, 2016; Holtzhausen, 2000, 2002, 2012;

Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015; Murphy, 2000; Scherer & Palazzo, 2006; Pal & Dutta, 2008). However, as such theories reflect a postmodern perspective, these scholars have not necessarily addressed the organizational value and use of these theories of disagreement for public relations praxis (Toth, 2002). Using understandings of dissensus and agonism as frameworks, this dissertation explores the decidedly non-postmodern questions of dissensual communication praxis: How, if at all, do public relations practitioners understand dissensus to be a part of their communication efforts? How, if at all, is dissensus valuable to organizations? How, if at all, are dissensus approaches valuable to communities? What variables are critical to understanding dissensus contexts? Such questions fill the research gaps raised by Scherer and Palazzo (2006) regarding the potential for dissensus approaches to deliberative CSR practices as well as adding to research within the issues management literature (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017) and fully functioning society paradigms (e.g., Heath, 2006; Heath & McComas, 2015).

This project contributes to public relations scholarship and praxis by addressing the following four questions, based on the concepts and literature around dissensus and agonism in an applied context. In this way, the project will add to research *on public relations* as well as research *for public relations* (J. Grunig, 2008). The first two questions center on building theory and knowledge within the public relations research domain, and are aimed at better understanding dissensus in organizational contexts.

RQ1: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of intractable problems?

This question reflects a meaning-making perspective: Rather than specifying the term *dissensus*, this reframing will place participants, their understandings, and their experiences managing intractable or wicked problems at the center of the analysis (e.g., Guo & Anderson, 2018; Place, 2015, 2019b). As exemplified in other projects that center on interviews with professionals (e.g., Place, 2012, 2015, 2019b), it will focus on practitioner management of intractable problems in their own work. Following Storie (2017), it will “allow for exploration of how people interpreted their experiences and what meaning they attributed to their experiences” (p. 298). A meaning making perspective helps to uncover how practitioners understand, describe, and engage with intractable or wicked problems; how they see themselves and their actions within their lifeworld (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This includes giving participants the opportunity to explain how managing intractable scenarios may be different from other public relations activities.

RQ2: How, if at all, do public relations practitioners understand agonism and dissensus to be a part of their communication efforts regarding intractable problems?

This research question is supported by public relations literature that suggests agonism and dissensus approaches to managing intractable problems exist within current public relations practice (Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Davidson, 2016; Stokes & Rubin, 2010), particularly within the context of issues management (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Madden, 2018). Dissensus

reflects an approach that fosters, rather than downplays tensions and conflict (Ciszek, 2016; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). Holtzhausen (2000) posited that “dissensus and dissymmetry offer more appropriate approaches to current public relations practices than seeking consensus and symmetry” (p. 93). Agonism reflects the approaches and processes used by practitioners working within dissensual contexts (Davidson, 2016; Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). The interview protocol will investigate how practitioners see public relations activities and tactics that utilize agonism and dissensus-based strategies and tactics.

RQ3: What best practices do practitioners believe they should follow when faced with intractable problems?

Public relations scholars have largely followed a normative, consensus-focused model for developing and testing best practices. Concepts including chaos (Sellnow, Seeger, & Ullmer, 2002), complexity (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006, 2008, 2010; Murphy, 2000) negotiation (Brooks, Wakefield, & Plowman, 2018, Plowman, 2005, 2007), dissensus (Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Rancière, 2010), and agonism (Davidson, 2016; Mouffe, 1999; Roberts-Miller, 2002) all point toward the need for additional approaches. This question reflects individual practitioner perspectives, which can be uncovered through the in-depth interviewing process. Examining practitioner perceptions of best practices interrogates the perspectives that they see as dominant, and the degrees to which they are willing and able to see a complete spectrum of potential solutions beyond normative conceptions of consensus (Gower, 2006; Pang, Jin & Cameron, 2010; Reber & Cameron, 2003).

RQ4: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of effectiveness, measurement, and evaluation in the context of intractability?

This question focuses on the ways in which practitioners understand the ostensibly post-positivist concepts of public relations evaluation within contexts of intractability that challenge the ideals of consensus. Rather than asking the positivist questions of measurement and evaluation (ex: did the communication have the intended effect?), wicked problems and intractable issues force practitioners to re-examine what acceptable outcomes might be and to what degree the organization can create win-win or consensus scenarios (Gower, 2006; Murphy, 2000; Plowman, 1998). Additionally, postmodern scholarship says that we may not be able to solve such intractable problems. This question interrogates how practitioners make meaning of these potentially conflicting aims. As professional codes of conduct and existing measurement best guidelines (such as the Barcelona Principles<sup>1</sup>) focus on pre-set, measurable objectives examining changes in awareness, opinion, or behavior (Macnamara, 2014, 2018a), forcing participants to examine these beliefs provides the possibility for a wider understanding of measurement beyond imposing organizational objectives onto publics and communities. This requires potential shifts in planning, executing, and measuring public relations engagement (van Ruler, 2015; Zerfass, 2008).

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<sup>1</sup> The Barcelona Principles are a set of measurement guidelines for public relations and strategic communication professionals, agreed upon by a global panel of professionals and scholars. The guidelines were originally determined in 2010, and revised in 2015 by the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC). Among many leading models, it is the one most prevalent in the U.S. (Macnamara, 2018c).



### **Chapter 3: Method**

The purpose of this study was to examine public relations practitioner experiences with managing intractable problems. Participant responses provide insights for theory and praxis regarding this understudied, but increasingly important area. To accomplish this, the research questions prioritized practitioner definition and understanding of such problems, their best practices in handling them, their approach to measuring and evaluating them, and the ways they make meaning of these processes and perspectives. To answer these questions, I began the study with a qualitative, post-positivist perspective and conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individual public relations practitioners. As little scholarship has examined practitioner experiences with intractable problems, the study took an exploratory approach. Qualitative interviews provided the best technique for deep understanding of practitioner perspectives and experiences—answering the meaning-centered research questions at hand. This approach fit the dissertation for several reasons: (1) prioritizing a “deep understanding of human actions, motives, and feelings” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 9) that match with the meaning-related questions at the center of the dissertation; (2) capturing the patterns and rituals of professionals, which can convey significant, layered insights about phenomena being studied (Carey, 1989; Corman, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011); and (3) organizing and codifying the complexity of observed patterns and phenomena (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Tracey, 2013). Additionally, using interviews generates data that reflects public relations

practitioners' experiences and perceptions as the central unit of analysis, as directed by the research questions.

By examining the ways in which practitioners enact the rituals of managing intractable issues, it is possible to see the valued assumptions underlying such practices (Carey, 1989). This is achieved through examination of individual practitioner meaning-making (e.g., Place, 2012, 2015, 2019b). By creating rich textual data from in-depth interviews and contextualizing practitioner experiences, I can, as a qualitative researcher, begin to determine “how meanings are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12). Meaning making research on public relations professionals—explored through qualitative interviews—has examined a variety of topics, including recent work on moral and ethical reasoning (Place, 2019b), gender binaries in the workplace (Place, 2012, 2015), relationship cultivation in public diplomacy settings (Storie, 2017), and resilience in the face of professional adversity (Guo & Anderson, 2018).

This chapter provides an overview of my paradigmatic stance and the procedures used for data collection and data analysis. It also addresses issues of reflexivity and the limitations of the research project.

### **Paradigmatic Stance**

The epistemological perspective of the dissertation reflects a post-positivist methodological approach, despite drawing conceptual insights from several postmodern theories. Post-positivism emphasizes “searching for causal explanations of patterned phenomena” while understanding the situated and contextual nature of the knowledge produced (Tracy, 2013, p. 39). While it does not purport to find *the*



truth, such research aspires to reflect the shared reality within communities and societies (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2017). This viewpoint suggests that my interpretation of the data is framed by my understandings and experiences. In order to fully capture participant perspectives and not overly influence findings, I strove to position myself as neutral facilitator and analyzer of data. While I attempted to minimize my influence as the researcher on the data collection and analysis, some degree of perspective or bias is unavoidable (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The interview-based approach explores a gap in theory where the addition of postmodern concepts adds value to scholarship and for contemporary public relations practice. In this way, the study aims to make postmodern concepts useful for scholars and practitioners, strategically introducing these philosophies where they can add insights. It answers the call of Toth (2002) to seek practical insights from the application of postmodernism. Methodologically, this allows for both individual and collective understandings of participant experiences, meanings, and insights as a starting point for building theory.

While taking a primarily post-positivist approach, I have integrated several postmodern theories as “sensitizing concepts” to inform my data collection and interpretation (Tracy, 2013, p. 27). Sensitizing concepts allow the researcher to collect data with a specific awareness toward crucial ideas and topics. In this way, I am drawing from a broad range of theoretical frameworks to inform the study while adhering to a rigorous data analysis process that examines both the immediate interpretation and meanings of my participants’ experiences as well as the collective, contextual impact as part of the public relations field.

## Procedures

As the research questions center on meaning-making by participants, an interview-based approach allows for gathering rich data and thick description of their experiences and perspectives (Geertz, 1973). A semi-structured approach ensures a similar set of topics are discussed, but allows for participant engagement and flexibility, as well as the opportunity to collect *in vivo* language based on their experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Tracy, 2013). The data was analyzed using primary and secondary rounds of coding to support data reduction and display of key themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). I secured IRB approval for the project in January 2019 and the interviews were conducted in February and March of 2019.

**Sampling.** Participants reflected a purposive sample of practicing public relations practitioners potentially challenged by the types of issues raised by Coombs and Holladay (2018). Purposive sampling reflected characteristics thought to be typical or representative of a population (Singleton & Straits, 2018). In total, 41 practitioners were interviewed. The criteria for inclusion in this study were theoretically driven: Each participant had at least 6 years of public relations experience in order to participate, so that participants were able to draw from personal knowledge. This approach follows PRSA, as it strongly recommends five years of experience for practitioners prior to taking the APR exam (Sha, 2011), as practitioners with more experience are more likely to enact a managerial role (Dozier & Broom, 1995). Most participants had significantly more experience; 20 participants were at the vice-president level or higher within their organizations, with another 12 having director-level experience. *Public relations practitioners* are defined as those

working with or for organizations including internal and external communication, as well as communicating on behalf of corporations, nonprofits, or governments. Their experience levels ranged from 6 to 46 years of practice, with an average of 20.9 years. The majority are senior leaders (the head public relations practitioner at their organization or a principal at a PR firm), with titles such as “Vice President of Communication,” “Director of Public Relations,” and “Founder/Partner.”<sup>2</sup> Twenty five participants had earned the APR credential and several had earned an related M.A. or M.B.A. Participants had each worked for or consulted with organizations including corporations, nonprofits or governments, and faced or witnessed irreconcilable or wicked problems in their PR careers. Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest that rich data can be collected from those with first-hand experience regarding the research questions at hand. Each was granted full confidentiality so that they were able to share their own experiences freely. This was particularly crucial to protect agency professionals discussing current or former client relationships. Additionally, I have removed the names of all organizations mentioned as participant employers or clients in order to further protect the identities of participants and allow them to speak honestly and reflect openly about their careers.

**Recruitment.** Participants were recruited for a purposive and maximum variation sample through personal connections, snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013), and through the local PRSA chapter and member directories. This mix of approaches generated a maximum variation sample on several fronts (Rubin & Rubin, 2005): consulting vs. in-house practice, organization type,

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<sup>2</sup> Titles have been modified slightly to ensure confidentiality. For full details, see Appendix A

geography, ideology, industry, and years of experience. These categories were identified based on an attempt to add perspectives from multiple segments of the public relations industry, incorporating distinctions among professional interest groups,<sup>3</sup> as well as understanding that factors such as organization type, practice area, and ideology would likely influence experiences and responses. By examining broad samples across these variables, the approach intends to seek insights from a diverse group of participants whose experiences can shed light on similarities and differences in distinct types of public relations practice. Each of these (and additional demographic information) are reflected in Appendix A. I recruited using materials and messages that highlighted my identity as an accredited practitioner and PRSA member, emphasizing shared experiences with participants. This included three main approaches: reaching out to contacts from my career as a practitioner, asking experienced practitioners and colleagues for recommendations and referrals, and researching potential participants through the PRSA directory and PRSA chapter websites (recruitment materials can be found in Appendix D). I began the outreach process by building a master contact list of potential participants. Using LinkedIn's InMail and email, I reached out to 139 participants, with 45 agreeing to participate (32 percent). Several dropped out due to logistical or scheduling challenges within the relatively narrow timeframe for interviews. I regularly updated the master list during the recruitment period to ensure that sample variation was maintained across categories as participants agreed or did not agree to participate.

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<sup>3</sup> For a list of PRSA Interest Sections I consulted when considering categories, visit <https://www.prsa.org/about/about-prsa/our-communities/professional-interest-sections/>.

**Pre-Test.** After I received IRB approval, I piloted the protocol with the initial three participants—all personal contacts who I knew fit the criteria and had experiences with intractability—and wrote a reflective memo about the interviews (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). I conducted, recorded, and transcribed these interviews to ensure I was accurately representing the content shared. These interviews went smoothly and I felt confident in utilizing the data and process to conduct the remaining 38. While the protocol remained largely unchanged, this process sensitized me to the potential challenges of speaking to this subject matter. Challenges included the following three issues: (1) ensuring participants did not spend significant portions of the interview discussing non-intractable situations (often organizational crises that were personally challenging, but not related to intractable or wicked problems); (2) utilizing theoretically sensitive probes to ensure coverage of the dissensual aspects of the scenarios discussed; and (3) adjusting the terminology used in the protocol to project neutrality relevant to the concepts at hand—ensuring participant responses reflected their individual meaning making, rather than being overly directed or shaped by the questions (Tracy, 2013).

In order to overcome these challenges, I adjusted the definition of intractable problems used in the protocol (see Appendix B) to more clearly articulate the distinction between intractable issues and crisis: Intractable issues form a specific part of issues management, issues can lead to crises, and crises can expose issues, but many organizational crises are not related to intractable issues. I also worked to maintain a focus on sensitizing concepts (including dissensus, agonism, contingency theory, etc.) so that I could give participants additional space and time to discuss

these issues. In the pilot interviews, I discovered that using the term *wicked problems* confused participants and complicated discussion. *Intractability* became the central term for my definitions and the jumping off point for my participants. Finally, the initial interviews demonstrated to me that a wider variety of issues could be perceived as *intractable* than I had anticipated. Throughout the rest of the interviews, I attempted to let the participants guide the discussion and select events or projects from their own work as widely as the shared definition allowed, rather than restricting them to my assumptions about what was intractable for them.

### **Data Collection**

The next section provides an overview of the interviewing process and protocol. Interviews took place until theoretical saturation was presumed to have been reached and no significant additional data came to light (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Saturation seemed to have been reached after approximately 36 interviews and was supported with similar findings over the final five interviews. While it is impossible to confirm with absolute certainty that major themes were captured among the selected population (U.S. public relations practitioners with at least six years of experience). One caveat would be that, as the participants reflected an overrepresentation of PRSA members and APRs, it may not have reached saturation with the experiences of non-PRSA members practicing public relations in the U.S.

Videoconferencing through Skype or Google Hangouts was requested for all participants and used as often as possible (23 interviews) so that visual, nonverbal data was not lost in the interview process. While there is the potential for additional challenges to rapport building based on technological issues and lack of in-person

connection, Skype has been shown to provide a valuable addition to interviewing practice when face-to-face interviews are not feasible, but geographic diversity is crucial (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Eighteen interviews were conducted over the phone at the request of the participant. To combat the visual data lost in phone interviews, I ensured that clarifying questions were asked and that additional checks were used to affirm my understanding of responses (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). All interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Tracy, 2013), either by the researcher (4) or professionally by Rev<sup>4</sup> (37).

The protocol (see Appendix B) reflected questions regarding their experiences with contentious, value-laden issues. The interviews reflected a meaning-making focus, rather than a strictly informational or critical perspective (Roulston, 2010). The data collection also involved tracking and noting moments of problematic interpretations, misunderstanding, or awkwardness—as they may be valuable contributors to our understanding of the challenges faced by practitioners or the potential disconnection points between theoretical understandings of the concepts and the participants' practical understandings (Roulston, 2013). Such concepts were collected through reflective memoing, which also contributed to the data for analysis (Tracy, 2013). Memos were written after each interview was completed, after each individual interview was transcribed/reflected upon, and at several stages during the analysis process. The final dataset included 41 interviews (37.8 hours of audio and 566 pages of transcripts), 157 pages of handwritten interview notes and reflections, and 48 pages of additional digital memoing.

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<sup>4</sup> Rev ([www.rev.com](http://www.rev.com)) is a professional transcription service widely used by social scientists.

**Interview protocol.** The interview protocol (see Appendix B) centered on how practitioners have handled difficult or irreconcilable situations in their practice, what factors were important in their decision-making, what outcomes they sought, and how they measured success. In addition to questions about their own careers, I presented the same scenario of an intractable problem to each participant and asked them to respond as the hypothetical public relations manager for the organization.<sup>5</sup> I balanced the need to speak with clarity and specificity about the concepts of the research with the importance of using questions and probes that were clear and relevant to the participants (Briggs, 1986; Roulston, 2010).

The protocol utilized opening questions about professional history for rapport building and several “tour questions” (Tracy, 2013, p. 147) about practitioner experiences to gain demographic information and create a straightforward start to the interaction. Then, participants were given the definition of intractability from which to match their relevant experiences. This open-ended approach allowed participants to demonstrate and define intractable problems within their own field—a critical step to understand their meaning making. Finally, a mix of generative and directive questions addressed key concepts, often as probes based on the content they had shared (Tracy, 2013).

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<sup>5</sup> Similar scenario questions (Ex: “You are the PR manager for a local nonprofit facing allegations of financial impropriety...”) are common as part of the written exam for the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) that I and many participants have taken. For this reason, I thought a scenario would be a relatively friendly and familiar way to engage practitioners, as well as provide an opportunity for those with less experience managing truly intractable scenarios to demonstrate their strategic acumen and meaning making.



The central interview protocol (complete protocol with theoretical integration available in Appendix B) drew heavily from the literature on dissensus, agonism, and alternative measurement and evaluation approaches in public relations. When appropriate, the protocol considered decision-making processes for the organization and its leaders (Holtzhausen, 2002). To reflect the first research question (meaning making surrounding intractability), the questions defined and introduced intractability (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Rittel & Webber, 1973). They included, using Ciszek (2016), *if* and *when* practitioners envisioned getting involved in intractable scenarios (with their organizations and hypothetically). It examined what communication tasks and processes they have engaged in or witnessed related to managing such situations—how practitioners attempted to manage the issue at hand (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). The interview questions for the second research question (agonism and dissensus as part of public relations practice) focused on contentious interactions between the organization and its publics (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Plowman, 2005, 2007), ongoing disagreement (Ciszek, 2016; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010), and the scenario, which brought up questions of community responsibility and social change (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Heath, 2006; Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018) as well as measurement and understandings of success (Macnamara, 2015, 2018a). Interview questions about best practices constituted the protocol for the third research question, including best practices for managing conflict in contentious scenarios (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Stokes & Rubin, 2010), the need for flexibility (van Ruler, 2014, 2015), and understandings based on norms of public relations professionalism (J. Grunig, 2000; Place, 2019b; Sallot et al., 1998). For the fourth research question (meaning

making for measurement and evaluation), it posed questions about monitoring or listening activities as well as measurement, evaluation, and varied understandings of success (Macnamara, 2016a, 2018a). It also questioned whether the practitioners envisioned societal or community implications or results from their actions (Edwards, 2018). At the end (so as not to bias earlier interview questions), it asked whether such situations force them to question their professional norms and ethics (Ciszek, 2016). It asked participants to consider the potential positives of discord or conflict (Lyotard, 1984).

The scenario and additional wrap up questions made up the final section of the protocol, ensuring each participant had a level playing field to discuss their strategic management of an intractable problem, and that they were able to bring up any additional valuable points about their perspective and process (Roulston, 2010). The scenario was developed in order to provide an opportunity for participants that had less practical experience in managing intractability an opportunity to analyze and discuss a relevant situation. It positioned the practitioner as the public relations manager for a start-up technology company that had developed an app to help parents navigate vaccinations. The brief provided a situation where anti-vaccine activists bombarded the company with antagonistic comments. Practitioners were asked about their prioritizing of resources and initial thoughts about best practices given these difficult circumstances. In executing the interviews, most participants did not need the scenario in order to provide multiple examples of intractable problems, but it still provided an opportunity to add to or deepen the discussion of best practices as well as a different organizational perspective. These data were integrated into the overall

findings and analysis. All questions were asked of each participant except for when they had sufficiently answered the question as part of an earlier response.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis started as soon as the interviews began through memoing. Data analysis is an iterative process, reflecting the need to constantly compare data, results, findings, and interpretations as one moves toward verification (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). I wrote memos at multiple stages in the process of analysis. Using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) as a primary guide, I utilized three main stages in analysis: data condensation, data display, and conclusion generation/verification.

**Memoing.** Memos played an important role in data analysis at several stages. While my memos were not part of the formal dataset used in analysis (in contrast to the interview transcripts), they helped to reflect on interviews and capture nonverbal insights as well as to begin the process of analyzing and organizing the interview themes. I used (1) immediate reflective memoing after interviews to capture the major thrusts of participant experiences and (2) analytic memoing at multiple stages in the process to reflect more deeply on the emergent themes and their implications. The reflective memos served as my initial space in which to understand and prioritize the themes from a specific interview, to highlight nonverbal and contextual information, and to reflect on the findings in light of other responses. Analytic memoing represented my thinking about emergent themes—and, later, metathemes—to continue to the process of organizing key findings and connecting them with existing theory.

**Initial coding.** The full text of each transcript was uploaded into NVivo for further analysis, taking into account the potential limitations of the software environment (Kelle, 1997). While digital tools can streamline data management, searching, coding, and review—potentially speeding up parts of the analysis process and making it easier to see the big picture of the data at hand—they can also create significant amounts of time and effort in learning and managing the software that may be better spent on analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Digital tools also threaten to move qualitative researchers toward narrower methods of analysis, such as counting key terms and other shortcuts, which may be somewhat helpful for identifying patterns, but may also obscure or detract from the rich, holistic, and multifaceted nature of the meaning making engaged in by participants. I attempted to overcome these challenges through memoing (as described above) as well as through generating iterative formulations of findings and revisiting the data to reflect on their appropriateness.

Several rounds of combined coding then took place, beginning with primary coding to establish themes, concepts, and insights (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). For the primary pass, I utilized *descriptive coding*, *in vivo coding*, *process coding*, and *evaluation coding* (pp. 74-76). Descriptive coding and *in vivo* coding allowed me to track emergent themes, capture literal practitioner experiences and language, and articulate their perspectives on the situations described. Process coding and evaluation coding allowed me to begin to mark potential patterns, stages, and iterations of concepts explained by the participants. *Process codes* use gerunds to reflect participant action (p. 75), while *evaluation codes* point toward participants’

qualitative evaluation of the concepts referenced (p. 76). Generally, the first two supported meaning making responses and the first two research questions, while the process and evaluation codes support the third and fourth research questions. The initial coding also examined the transcripts and texts for dissensus approaches, exemplified by heightened contention, agonistic or antagonistic communication, polarization, and differentiated perspectives (e.g., Ciszek, 2016; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015; Lyotard, 1984).

This was followed by memoing and the iterative development of network-focused data displays to represent the relationships between and among the central emergent concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). As part of the analysis, understanding the metacommunicative event of the interview process is crucial (Briggs, 1986; Roulston, 2010). As a metacommunicative event, the context of the interview comes into play, as well as the ways in which participants respond with avoidance, emotions, enthusiasm (or apathy), and nonverbal cues. Notes were taken on these factors as part of each interview. In particular, non-standard responses and challenging questions were noted and analyzed in an attempt to understand the participant's perspective and gain insight beyond the literal meaning of their response. Even responses that fail to answer the question can provide valuable data to understand the experiences of public relations practitioners (Roulston, 2010).

**Data condensation.** Next, a process of secondary or axial coding allowed for continued organizing and sorting of metathemes emerging from the initial data reduction process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Throughout this process, the constant comparative method was utilized to ensure

connection to the original data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A construct table was utilized to pair metathemes with supporting quotes and evidence, providing a clear, organized data reduction tool for presenting the findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Each research question was answered through an analysis of the relevant participant responses, paired with additional understandings and perspectives from the textual analysis.

**Data display.** A crucial stage of the iterative process of qualitative data analysis is data display, creating “a visual format that presents information systematically” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 108). Display helps researchers to better understand and organize data, to reflect on its representativeness, to communicate findings to others, as well as to check validity and coherence (Tracy, 2010). My analysis utilized both matrices and networked models. Matrices are particularly useful for ordering, condensing, and calling attention to specific variables within a dataset (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 108). I utilized matrices at multiple stages of data analysis as part of an iterative process to organize and group themes from primary and secondary coding passes. Later in the process, networks were utilized to map causation and iterate during theory development.

**Conclusions and verification.** As Tracy (2010) outlines, traditional measures of quality in quantitative research such as validity (that research represents what it purports to represent) and reliability (the replicability and consistency of a research tool or method over time) are not directly applicable in qualitative work. She presents eight criteria for excellence in qualitative research: Worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence (p.

840). In particular, rich rigor, credibility, and meaningful coherence support the process of drawing and verifying conclusions in this dissertation.

***Rich rigor.*** This study demonstrated a rigorous methodological approach in its theoretical grounding, data collection, and data analysis processes. First, it required a thorough understanding of public relations scholarship—particularly its paradigmatic evolutions—necessary to devise the research questions to bring intractable problems to the forefront. Through the large, diverse set of participants; long-form, in-depth interview approach; full transcription, and thorough analysis including several months spent soaking in, reflecting on, and memoing about the data. Multiple iterations of the thematic outline and structure were attempted, both within each research question and among them.

***Credibility.*** Credible results were demonstrated through thick description of findings (Geertz, 1973), lengthy quotes (when helpful to support findings and convey tone), and clear multivocality. Practitioner responses were not unanimous, and each major theme and finding contains caveats regarding the degree to which it was supported by participants and, when relevant, any shared characteristic that might provide further insights. The analysis presented does not shy away from holding up single instances of a specific phenomenon if it generates a valid, useful understanding of participant experiences.

***Meaningful coherence.*** Great care has been taken to generate a cohesive whole from the wide-ranging experiences of 41 public relations professionals as captured by the interviews. Such a process involves recounting their stories and experiences as they perceived them to capture participant meaning making, but also

to draw relevant themes, insights, and connections from among these experiences. In qualitative research, the process of building coherence is about prioritizing information—finding the experiences, quotes, and situations that accurately represent lived experiences of the participants while providing relevant insights to the research questions at hand. Through multiple revisions of the results and discussion sections, this prioritization emerged and brought the most crucial results and findings to the fore.

### **Building Theory in Public Relations**

Public relations scholarship does not always clearly articulate what means to build “good” theory. Public relations practitioners are “desirous of good theories, and have found public relations scholars of little help” (Toth, 2002, p. 247). As an academic discipline, public relations is still immature in generating theory-driven and theory-building scholarship (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2011). Building theory balances the tensions between the prioritization and simplification needed to operationalize concepts and the knowledge that “research tends to complicate the identity and outcomes of public relations” (Edwards, 2018, p. 5).

J. Grunig (2008) outlined research *in public relations*, *on public relations*, and *for public relations*. He describes research *in public relations* as often performed by practitioners as part of their day-to-day work. Such approaches tend not to be theory-driven or provide deeper insights beyond their immediate circumstances. By contrast, research *on public relations*, often conducted by academics, can either support the professional through identifying and refining best practices or, as in the case of critical scholars, to “expose its negative activities” (p. 91). Finally, research *for public*



*relations* examines the connection between theory and practice, hopefully to spread theoretically grounded insights among practitioners. To this end, public relations scholars must develop both positive and normative theories to understand and improve practice for organizations, publics, and societies (J. Grunig, 2006). From a postmodernist perspective, Toth (2002) argues that practitioners should be open to “any good theory that has practical significance” (p. 248) and that postmodern scholars should not shy away from considering “effectiveness.” According to Holtzhausen (2000), postmodernism helps practitioners to explain contradictions, become informed by broader social and societal understandings, as well as to acknowledge the importance of micropolitics within organizations. In this way, research *on public relations* can integrate knowledge gleaned from praxis while still striving to integrate postmodern concepts.

## **Reflexivity**

As a former public relations practitioner, I approached interviews with a deep understanding of praxis, but also with the biases of industry experience. In this context, I worked to be aware of my identity as a “fellow” practitioner. It was useful for purposes of rapport building (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Tracy, 2013) and to reduce power differentials, but conflicted with my desire to maintain a degree of distance from participants. From a post-positivist perspective, this reflects the inclusion (and acknowledgement) of my personal experiences in the process of developing research questions and methodology, but attempts to avoid overtly influencing interview data that should be primarily reflective of participant experiences. This section reviews the role of identity, ideology, and confidentiality in the context of researcher reflexivity.

**Positionality and identity.** I am a public relations practitioner-turned scholar who interviewed other practitioners. I highlighted this identity in order to recruit participants and build rapport during the interview process. I utilized my professional identity during the interviews to be supportive and understanding as participants recounted challenging experiences. As I had found myself in similarly difficult circumstances at many points in my own professional career, it would have been disingenuous for me to present myself as a completely neutral, uninterested researcher.

In the cases where I opened up a bit more about my own beliefs and perspectives (generally at the behest of the participants), I did so at the end of the interviews after the protocol was complete. Interviewing strategic communication professionals can be challenging, in that we—because of our training and experiences—often attempt to frame our work in the best-possible light. This can be problematic when attempting to interrogate intractable issues and wicked problems that, by definition, will be challenging, complex, messy, and ambiguous. Given this reality, I used my professional identity, occasional references to my own professional work, my APR designation, and a sympathetic ear to ease the potential challenges or obstacles for practitioners to open up about the reality of working in such circumstances.

Additionally, I was very aware of the linguistic challenges of using academic concepts in conversation with practitioners. As noted above, using alternative language and providing relevant, detailed examples improved understanding and connection for participants. It also provided a clearer path toward capturing and

understanding their individual meaning-making processes—attempting to avoid imposing terminology on the interviewees (Tracy, 2013). While Lyotard’s (1984) use of *dissensus* or Rittel and Webber’s (1973) *wicked problems* are not unclear, they do not reflect the daily, *in vivo* language of public relations practice. In this way, I addressed these concepts obliquely and through examples rather than using *wicked problems*, *agonism*, or similar terms.

**Ideology.** I have a tendency to be supportive of the participants’ responses during interviews. As my research questions focus on their meaning making processes, I believe it is important to encourage interviewees to develop their perspectives. I sought out participants from across the ideological spectrum, as I felt ideological diversity was important when discussing polarizing issues. Again, I maintained a supportive neutrality through the interviews, but was challenged in several situation with viewpoints vastly different from my own. For example, one participant, while describing his private, evangelical Christian university’s views and position on same-sex couples, made clear his belief that homosexuality was immoral. While I found this perspective to be personally repugnant, I maintained composure and encouraged him to explain the professional details of the stance. It resulted in useful data about the challenges faced by a non-mainstream organization. As I identify this research as coming from a post-positivist perspective—it is not participatory action research (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Tracy, 2013)—I did not feel that it was my place to confront this participant.

While the vast majority of communication from potential participants, even if they could not take part, was positive, there was one potential participant who balked

at the prospect of interview after asking in more detail about the types of questions posed. She referred to not wanting to participate in “opposition research,” indicating that she understood my perspective as anti-corporate and pro-activist. The email hurt me personally, in part because the individual is someone that I have genuine professional respect for, and in part because the tone of the response indicated a misunderstanding of my ideologically and organizationally agnostic approach to the subject matter. I reached out to her again, not to encourage her to participate, but to provide additional details regarding the purpose and approach of the research. I did not receive any further response. While this was disappointing, it caused me to take additional precautions (the interaction occurred during my initial wave of outreach in late January) to present an ideologically neutral approach to the protocol and any participant interactions beyond the initial scripted outreach. While this did not cause me to revise any of my initial outreach materials (and thus did not necessitate IRB approval), it caused me to provide additional and more complete detail about the project in responding to any questions from potential participants. In this way, I believe it provided a clearer picture of the project.

**Confidentiality.** I blinded both the participants themselves as well as their organizations—speaking only generally about the organizational type—in order to allow practitioners to feel comfortable discussing some of their most challenging and, sometimes, unsuccessful work. While this is not an ideal situation from a data collection perspective and in terms of resonance in reporting results (Tracy, 2010), I believe that the most important factor to answer the research questions was to give participants the space to feel comfortable discussing their meaning making. This was

more important than potentially (and unintentionally) (1) pressuring them into identifying situations that could leave them professionally vulnerable, (2) limiting response to only situations with positive outcomes, or (3) leaving out valuable, if less-than flattering details or insights from the processes of managing such situations. In several situations, particularly with large or sensitive agency client stories, the participants and I discussed the correct amount of information to disclose about the organization to ensure their confidentiality. One story ended up being left out entirely (after discussion with the participant) because it precipitated significant media coverage and would have been nearly impossible to provide useful, but non-identifiable details.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The next section presents the results of interview data organized by research question. These data represent participant experiences of public relations and the associated meanings of intractable situations, as well as the ways in which they enact their professional roles under challenging circumstances. It offers evidence in the form of quotes from the interviews themselves, as well as initial thematic interpretations of the findings, both at the individual level and the collective level.

### **RQ1: How Do Public Relations Practitioners Make Meaning of Intractable Problems?**

The first research question addresses the central topic of practitioner meaning making surrounding intractable problems. The process of understanding meaning making includes analyzing practitioner perceptions, emotions, and actions surrounding these situations. Their perspectives provide valuable insights for scholars as to (1) operationalizations of intractability in praxis and (2) the evolving challenges faced in this work. Practitioners did not hesitate to identify a multitude of intractable problems, both expected and unexpected. Such problems emerged under a variety of circumstances, from internal organizational divisions and social issues causing organizational crises to practitioners counseling clients on whether or not to engage. Practitioner responses to questions about managing intractable issues were often hesitant or unsure, and many expressed that there was no easy answer. Participants often followed widely established crisis or campaign planning processes for explaining and managing these situations. Nearly all acknowledged that intractable

issues presented a growing challenge for them as part of their work—one that forced them to think and act in new ways.

The themes represented below describe the *facets of intractability* that emerged from the interviews (*degree of intractability, issue type, issue locus, and identity involvement*), their implications, and examples of resulting tactics or practices. Practitioners found intractability in a wide variety of contexts. While each practitioner listened to the same definition of intractable problems at the beginning of their interview, their responses varied greatly across industries, organizational types, and functional roles. These results ground the findings in practitioner experience. To understand the practitioner viewpoint, it was imperative to capture the facets they included as part of intractability. These defining features were pulled from the many narratives participants shared, based primarily on their individual experiences. To reflect the range of responses and scenarios without value judgments, each facet is rendered as a continuum. This represents the variety encountered during interviews while identifying the relevant factor.

**Solvable → fully intractable.** While some issues described by practitioners displayed multiple signs of intractability and were very difficult or impossible to solve, others reflected only some aspects of intractability and were merely challenging to manage. Each of these examples contained some degree of conflict, and multiple aspects of the definitions of *wicked problems*, such as complexity, uniqueness, lack of clarity about their causes and potential solutions, and connectedness to other problems. Practitioners described and understood these problems based on their degree of intractability—whether they were merely difficult

to solve or truly resistant to any type of mutually acceptable solution among the stakeholders involved.

Significantly intractable problems reflected irresolvable (or nearly irresolvable) issues, high degrees of contention, and a lack of willingness on one or more sides to search for common ground. An example of a significantly intractable scenario came from an agency practitioner consulting with an expanding airport for a fast-growing mid-sized city. While many forces in the city and region supported the airport's growth, geographic and financial factors made such expansion challenging. The airport found a potential solution—a mining company interested in purchasing and developing part of an environmental buffer zone, which would finance needed airport development. But, the proposal quickly faced opposition: A community activist organization took steps to publicly reprimand the airport for environmental degradation. This was despite what the participant described as significant community-focused efforts: to set aside a large area of the purchased land for recreation, to maintain a significant buffer with a nearby state park, and to sequester funds for a thorough reclamation project for the mine (after 35 years). Through community meetings, listening sessions, and other public forums, airport management attempted, but was unable to find common ground on the issue. The participant explained that sometimes organizations are stuck “engaging with a stakeholder who is not your friend—you're going to accept that—you have to accept that everyone's not going to get along.” This situation reflected a very high degree of intractability due to the inability to find space for acceptable compromise, despite efforts to listen, adjust, and negotiate.



Another example of a significantly intractable scenario included a practitioner working on a statewide vaccination campaign in the Midwest. This practitioner was clear about the campaign's goals—to move more communities, particularly elementary schools, toward 90% vaccination rates. With current rates of these students in her state at just under 60%, she emphasized that since 2015 the state had moved from the bottom ten to nearly enter the top half of states in its vaccination rates. This constituted progress toward an overall goal of herd immunity, but recognized the continual challenges of this process, and the need to repeat it constantly for younger children prior to entering school. While progress was made, it would have been difficult for her to predict a future where vaccination rates met their goals for public health. In this sense, while the campaign's objective was more clear cut than many intractable or wicked problems, resolution seemed, at best, a long way off.

While fewer practitioner examples touched the other end of the spectrum, many expected contentious activities might be considered challenging issues, but not intractable. This could be due to the small scale or impact of the intractability on the organization. For example, a practitioner working for a major educational publisher described a variety of potentially contentious issues that arose in the industry such as standardized testing, textbook pricing, and the emphasis on digital or rental textbooks. Each of these issues has clear detractors and occasional flare-ups of significant challenges, but the company's size, market position, and the inertia in the marketplace made it so that the company was not significantly challenged by any of them over the long term.

Another type of less-intractable situation would be an issue that was able to be, to a certain degree, resolved. One participant, a media relations-focused practitioner at a major university, shared the experience of having a well-known white supremacist speaker who was invited to campus by a student group. The university public relations team, along with many other entities on campus, made a decision to allow the speech under very specific conditions, including keeping the event in a very isolated part of campus. She emphasized that the university needed to communicate its free speech position, but that it should not in any way be taken as an endorsement of the views of the speaker. In the end, a very small number of audience members attended; the safety of students, faculty, and staff was maintained; and the university was able to publicly state its values and explain its position. The practitioner explained that, while it was a no-win situation, she felt that the university, and her team, had done their best to manage the situation toward a consensus outcome, prioritizing key stakeholders. Allowing the event to take place allowed for a mutually acceptable solution, even for a speaker with views widely divergent from the organization.

**Natural → situational.** A second defining feature that emerged from the interviews suggested that intractability may be natural or inherent as opposed to situational. For *naturally intractable* organizations, intractability is a normal and expected state. Organizations prepare for it, practitioners are experienced with it, and participants considered it to be a relatively normal part of their day-to-day work. Examples included advocacy organizations as well as practitioners working in stigmatized industries such as tobacco products or waste management. Conversely,

*situational intractability* reflected scenarios where organizations were not regularly exposed to intractable problems or where the contention stemmed from a specific circumstance or issue. The latter included participants practicing on behalf of ostensibly non-controversial corporations, many community-focused nonprofits, as well as some government agencies. The former includes highly polarized or controversial organizations or industries as well as regular management of contentious issues. By contrast, the latter references organizations either selecting to be involved (or not involved) in discussion of contentious issues. Some organizations and practitioners have more choices than others, depending on the industry and circumstances. Participants faced intractable problems in different ways when they were understood as regularly occurring or part of the job, in contrast to situations in which organizations were not used to engaging.

The most common natural scenarios brought up by practitioners related to doing advocacy or issues management work on behalf of organizations, while others included organizations in highly contentious industries (such as public education or tobacco products), as well as organizations with publicly established, but potentially polarizing, values. This encompassed corporate communication scenarios as well as political battles and trade association communication—situations where the deciding factor for success was often a legislative majority, a public referendum, or a regulatory body's decision. Particularly for associations or organizations inherently involved in contentious issues, intractable problems were a fact of life and an expected occurrence. Several challenges that came up in multiple interviews included labor and union negotiations, mergers, real estate development obstacles,

pharmaceutical regulation, financial industry regulation, and a variety of higher education challenges—from funding and free speech to sports and student-athletes. As a practitioner who spent time with a nonprofit college sports association explained, “there are those that think college sports is the absolute worst thing to happen to young people, and that it exploits young people's abilities. And there are those that believe that college sports provides opportunities for young people.” The organization operated strategically within that polarized environment.

A corporate example of natural intractability came from the waste management and energy industries. A participant explained that his client, a company attempting to set up a power plant fueled by biosolid sludge, was meeting resistance within a rural community on the West Coast. In the participant’s description, the plan was environmentally friendly and would bring much-needed jobs to the community. The client—knowing the negative reputation of the industry—had attempted to move in under the radar to get regulatory approval for the project without first engaging in community outreach. The participant came on board as a consultant after the company had run into challenges from community members and the agriculture industry that ultimately doomed the project:

Being transparent with the area to begin with would have helped. I think they were given some bad advice by some of our local council members at the county level, who I think basically initially told them to just come in and try to get your conditional use permit and everything like that you don't have to talk about it a lot, and I think that was a real big mistake on the part of the public. It just drove home the point that being transparent is really the best thing that

a potentially controversial project should want to do. It would be common sense.

In this case, the project failed after two years of advocacy efforts—essentially regulated out of existence through a community-based and farming-supported initiative taxing sludge being brought to the county. The intractability of the issues was known and expected, but initial reticence of the company to address them with transparency made these challenges impossible to overcome. Given prior negative experiences, the organization was unsurprised to face this issue, but also unprepared to do what was needed to overcome it.

These previously described intractable issues represented an anticipatable scenario for practitioners. Despite the polarization and contention, such issues could, in many cases, be predicted and planned for by practitioners and organizations. By contrast, the intractability in other scenarios was *situational*, further complicating planning and engagement. Situational intractability was described by participants where the organization was involved—voluntarily or not—in unexpected intractable issue discourse. This could be due to the organizational type: an otherwise non-controversial company could become drawn into a polarizing political debate. It could also be a proactive choice to become involved in a sensitive issue.

An experienced agency practitioner in the Southeast described a situation with a long-time client: a local financial institution. The organization was, in many ways, politically progressive, but that generally kept such decisions private—limited to organizational policy and HR issues. In a politically diverse and often polarized community, it was in the organization's best interests to keep such opinions to

themselves. In one instance, the leadership team was goaded by an activist organization into taking a position on same-sex employee benefits:

After we saw what was happening online, and saw what was happening internally, I had to talk to someone. I had to do something. We either had to take a position and live with it, or I had to go talk to [the activist organization] and tell them why. It was sort of unknown what was going to happen, but we took a risk and we talked to the person that we thought was the most reasonable and that worked.

The organization had not been planning on taking a public stance on the issue. The participant, in her role as a consultant, did not recommend that they take such a position. But circumstances, in the act of an external group, forced their hand. In the end, the participant was able to come to a mutually agreeable place with the activist organization without having to take a public stance. As in this example, situationally intractable scenarios were fraught with short timeframes to make decisions, competing internal and external pressures, and, often, no-win circumstances for the organizations involved. As in the prior example, many of these unplanned circumstances revolved around issues of social change.

A key participant perspective for understanding intractable issues was the context of social pressure and societal change, which occurred for both natural and situational intractability. Shifting societal norms and expectations put organizations in novel situations where practitioners had to balance multiple factors and make difficult choices about engagement. In some cases, this led to organizations becoming more polarizing as public opinion shifted over time, such as a participant who referenced

SeaWorld's<sup>6</sup> animal rights issues, while other organizations faced a changing set of situational issues stemming from new or deeper activist engagement as well as social movements that span industries, such as #MeToo. Among the social issues that emerged as intractable for their organizations, practitioners mentioned globalization issues, gun rights/gun control, environmental protection, consumer protection, gay rights, fair-housing/gentrification, and food production. One veteran participant described a local anti-discrimination ordinance her client faced, explaining that "it was new for businesses to be having this discussion. Activists in the community have been having this discussion for many years, right? Politics, people in government, but not in the business level." Many of these issues have been driven, according to participants, by changing public views or awareness, rather than by the nature of contentious industries or issues. In some cases, this equates to a temporary (situational) impact on an organization, while, in others, it repositions an industry, product, or issue in a newly contentious way. One participant mentioned Amazon<sup>7</sup> and horror stories about working conditions as an example of changing societal expectations for a corporation:

When you think about it, Amazon could have just said, "to hell with that. We don't have any competition. People are still going to sign up for that \$99.00 Amazon Prime no matter what we do, so why should we pay people 15 bucks an hour?" The fact that they did is, I thought, kind of interesting.

This became the most prominent source of unexpected or less expected examples of intractability, as well as voluntary engagement: where organizations choose to insert

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<sup>6</sup> SeaWorld was not mentioned as a direct employer or current client of a participant.

<sup>7</sup> Amazon was not mentioned as a direct employer or current client of a participant.

themselves into discourse on an intractable issue. For example, one participant's organization—a major foundation—decided to take on payday lending reform as a core issue, challenging an existing, entrenched industry first at a state-by-state level, as well as through federal regulation. This was not a decision made lightly: “In this case the real driver was a sense of what would be good public policy and convincing the [foundation's board of directors] that that was indeed the case and if they felt that was the case then they would commit the resources needed to advance that policy.” If the board and organizational leadership felt the project supported the organization's values and was a worthwhile use of resources, advocacy and engagement in a contentious situation would be part of the job.

***Misidentification of crises as intractable problems.*** Crises can lead to intractable problems and such problems can cause crises. Participants occasionally struggled to distinguish difficult situations or organizational crises from fully intractable problems. Several practitioners referred to reputation management, crisis planning, and social media monitoring/response. One example came from a global practitioner working with an alcoholic beverage company facing a product quality crisis in Asia. In this case, while several of the issues he discussed (such as intercultural communication challenges and lack of trust in a U.S. company abroad) reflected aspects of intractability, the thrust of the narrative focused on a specific instance of product tampering which fueling public fear about the product. This primarily represented a crisis scenario, despite the background factors of intractability. While this and other crisis-centric scenarios had the potential to overlap with intractable problems, the majority of the instances built around these areas focus



on traditional organizational crises such as organizational and employee errors or negligence, external activism, or regulatory issues (in the context of issues management). In discussing financial institutions, one participant explained the distinction by saying that “the underbanked and the unbanked is a real crisis in America. But it's not necessarily credit unions' crisis. They're there to help, but they don't necessarily—their business is not threatened by the inability to bring these people into the fold.”

**Internal → external.** The second facet concerned the locus of intractability. Intractability was centered in many places, including external pressure and within organizations themselves. These examples highlight external, internal, and merger scenarios to showcase the breadth and importance of the variable. Participants volunteered a variety of relevant situations, including cross-cultural challenges in global organizations, agencies reconciling disparate client ideologies, or the perceptions of PR staff within the organization itself. Particularly, as no questions in the protocol specifically referenced internal issues, this theme makes a compelling case for inclusion of the locus of intractability as a crucial facet. Participants demonstrated that intractability did not come only from widespread societal change or community challenges. Often, it stemmed from smaller-scale issues within organizations themselves.

Most examples of intractability reflected external challenges, such as the university tasked with implementing broadly unpopular campus carry handgun rules by its state legislature, a consultant working with a state agency to increase childhood vaccination rates, or the multiple businesses (such as financial institutions and

insurance firms) deciding whether to take on clients in the emerging cannabis industry, with its questionable legal status at the federal level. In each of these cases, an external action or issue put the organization in a position where they would need to decide how to respond or engage. The central challenge, in each case, was rooted beyond the bounds of the organization. While I expected to find these externally centered challenges, multiple practitioners provided examples where the intractability stemmed from inside organizations.

One internal example spoke to the cultural challenges of a global company that made a particular issue challenging. As part of a labor dispute for a hospitality and staffing company, the participant was caught in the middle between savvy union communicators on the east coast of the United States and the company's conservative, slow-to-react management team on the other side of the Atlantic:

Because this is a French company, part of the culture, very strongly rooted, was just a sense of decorum about “we don't brag, and we don't air our dirty laundry, and we don't go head-to-head with negative publicity. We just don't do that. We'll wait, and it'll blow over, it always does, and we'll do business as usual, and we don't want to engage because that'll put fuel on the fire. The more we say, the bigger of a target we are.” You know, all of those arguments were definitely beliefs, not just excuses, and it's our belief that this is the sound business practice is just to stay quiet. So we went along with that for a while. But then, as I said, this escalated.

For this practitioner, the clear difference in understanding the situation among the unionized U.S. workers, the U.S. communication team, and the Paris-based

management led to a chasm that made the situation intractable (at least temporarily) for the parties involved. The circumstances could certainly be construed as an organizational crisis—reflecting an immediate threat to organizational survival—but the reactive stance of the organization and the depth of the differences in perspective led the practitioner to emphasize its intractability—prioritizing the inability to resolve contention. Differentiated values and hesitancy to respond publicly exasperated the internal intractability for a large and diverse organization.

Even within an individual public relations agency, the breadth of clients and their ideological stances can create challenges for employees and agency management. One participant described how her agency—a major global firm—has a significant practice area across many parts of the food and agriculture industries, from mass-market food production companies to organic-only brands. This diversity led to internal disagreements, some verging on intractable, based on the polarization and dissention among client ideologies and agency staff's personal beliefs. It was crucial, from her perspective, to ensure that (1) team members had input into the agency's decisions, and (2) that individuals were not asked to work on accounts that were in opposition to their personal beliefs:

The way that we navigated it as an agency is, I would say, we created some separation between people who are philosophically not aligned. So, we allow people to work inside a philosophy that is aligned to their personal views. So we're not asking them to put their own opinions aside. So, that's one. And then the other is we did a co-creation exercise. We called it Hot Seat. All the people in the food group dialed in to an ideation session in which we co-

created a narrative that met in the middle about who we are as an agency, what we will and won't work on, and why. And we came to consensus on that because whether you're on one side of an issue or the other, there's a value system in place that can be aligned or can be consistent. For instance, we all supported that we wouldn't make any claims that weren't grounded in science—that we wouldn't support making claims on either side unless there was a basis for supporting those claims from the client.

In this way, the agency was able to find common ground, but also maintain space for dissenting clients, perspectives, and opinions within the team. This allowed for additional employee engagement and a wide set of potentially supported ideological viewpoints. It did not necessarily end or fully resolve the contention, but ensured both sides understood each other's perspectives.

Mergers provided a crucial example of this factor, referenced by several practitioners involved in them: Participants described one between two hospitals and another between two universities. Both cases reflected intractable issues in bringing two organizations together. In the case of the hospital, the logical organizational fit between the two entities was challenged by deeply held values:

We were a large community based hospital, and we merged with a Catholic hospital. And the issue of abortion and termination of pregnancies was front and center. So the Catholic hospital could not move forward with the merger if we were going to continue procedures, but our medical staff said, these procedures are legal, they're recognized, they're necessary, and our patients are coming to us requesting (them). So we had to decide, what would we do?

Organizations with opposing values created an intractable issue through the act of merging. In the end, the hospitals created a separate organizational entity to provide abortions, wholly run by hospital staff and physicians. It allowed for, according to the participant, “a degree of separation that was actually acceptable to the church,” but necessitated creating a new entity, through a grant. Ongoing intractability was only avoided through the creation of a separate, third organization to house the action at the heart of the contention.

The merged university—a large public university—combined two smaller institutions, one of which the practitioner was a staff member. She described the many decisions made to balance new and old, as well as to carry as much pride, stability, and donor enthusiasm as possible from the old institutions to the new one. Beyond the obvious naming challenges, these included decisions about the mascot, school colors, and other small, but critical items. As she explained, the process reflected the complex act of merging two organizations with deep histories and diverse constituencies. The challenges rippled through faculty, staff, students, and alumni of both institutions. In both cases, these mergers demonstrated the intractability of clashing cultures and values between distinct institutions. In both of these cases, and in several others described by participants, the location of intractability relative to the organization played a crucial role in their understanding of the issue.

***Inescapably intractable organizations.*** At one extreme, an organization reflected complete or inescapable intractability. One participant, the public relations director for a large public school district in a major city, simply described the entirety

of her work as dealing with inherently intractable problems. She began with a laundry list of challenges: The lack of trust in public and government institutions, the challenges of a public schools mandate to meet the needs of all students, housing and neighborhood issues, racism, poor teacher quality (precipitated by low pay and challenging working conditions), as well as entrenched corruption and racism. Residents do not trust the school district. The administration does not trust the teachers. The organization (and its many students and employees) are used as political pawns. It was clear early in the interview that the nature of ostensibly failing, large, urban public school districts in the U.S. today creates a set of challenges that makes the organization's existence both vital and inherently intractable.

For the public relations function and those who take on this crucial work, this creates a multitude of challenges:

Especially with an urban district environment, there will be low morale and lack of organizational trust, which are very difficult to overcome. I think that when people question the credibility of a communications department's ability to function, to create good work, and to tell the truth—I see this a lot in schools all over the country, where practitioners in the organization are often on the threshing floor, having to not only justify their existence, but also having to reconcile why they do what they do, what they have done and what they're going to do. When you're dealing in spaces with poor culture, low morale, cash strapped environments with not a lot of resources but very high demand, colleagues in need—these are things which not only cause a lot of stress, turnover, create bad practices and contribute to them. I think that's

something that, in the last seven years, that has been the most intractable issue that seems like it's just impossible to overcome. I think the reason why I think people—It becomes a reason of—any decent human being would leave. So, if you decide to stay, what does that say about you?<sup>8</sup>

As exemplified in this answer, the participant struggled to put some of these challenges into words. It moved this case beyond natural intractability and into the territory of wholly and inescapably intractable—where the organization's challenges were inescapable based on its mandate and values as an institution. In a scenario where a school district is stripped of the power and authority many large organizations possess, but is still expected to carry out a crucial societal function, every step wades into intractability.

This interview was an outlier within this research, but represented a crucial perspective to include. It was not the only industry represented that faced significant, ongoing, and somewhat inherent intractable problems. Practitioners with experience in industries such as pharmaceuticals and tobacco products shared similar concerns of

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<sup>8</sup> This was the most personal and emotional interview of the 41 I conducted. It spoke to the heartbreaking state of public education in many urban areas and the challenges faced not only by the students and teachers, but staff. Public relations professionals, in my experience, become extremely knowledgeable about how their organizations or clients function. Professionals in such roles as public information officers for school districts face the additional burdens of working within byzantine organizational structures, with little funding, and under high public scrutiny. Additionally, as in this interview, they take their work seriously in part because they have a deep personal belief in the value of excellent public relations in helping the organization to achieve its goals and help students succeed. A community mandate serves as a tool for many nonprofit and government public relations practitioners to encourage their organizations to embrace an open stance to divergent perspectives, but it proves to be a significant personal burden when such issues are both inescapable and intractable.

working within constant contention in industries with strong opponents to their existence. The next theme explores this personal connection in additional detail.

**Personal → organizational.** Participants identified a range of involvement in the scenarios they described, including those that were intractable for their organizations or clients, and those that were personally intractable. This formed an important component of meaning making, as practitioners described their individual experiences along this continuum.

One decidedly external example came from a community library’s public relations director (a “one-woman show” as a self-contained department handling internal and external communication). She shared an anecdote about Drag Queen Story Hour, an activity growing in popularity at many libraries across the country to promote values of gender fluidity and inclusivity to children. A local program was met with protests when it occurred in a relatively liberal local community near the participant’s library—both suburban enclaves in a major Midwestern metro area, the aforementioned participant’s being decidedly more conservative. When questioned about the program by a conservative local lawmaker, her response reflected an understanding of the community as well as a reinforcement of the organization’s core values:

We like to read the needs of our community and the wants of our community. That's not to say that 10 years from now that's not going to be a want or need that our community has. So I was saying, “we don't offer it now, but we're not shutting the door completely on it should our community come out and say we are supportive of this. We want to see something like this here.”



This exemplified external intractability in part because the values of the practitioner and the organization were in alignment. Her personal beliefs were reinforced by the free-speech mission of the library.

This scenario also demonstrated how community-based organizations, both nonprofits and government agencies, reflected some of the most entrenched challenges in part because they could not easily make choices that alienated significant constituencies. This was firmly an external issue for the organization. The same practitioner explained the challenges of working within this type of intractability:

As a government entity, it sometimes gets difficult to say half our community wants this, half our community doesn't want this. We're supported by tax dollars. Libraries at their heart are very liberal organizations, and we offer things that people can't get their hands on. We're against censorship. We're all about the first amendment, so it's difficult in a lot of cases for libraries to take really strong stands without the communities' acting, but at the same time when you've got an enclave of community who wants something like that, and you have to be supportive of that as well.

She navigated these challenges successfully in part, she described, because of her personal agreement with the organization's values, thus situating the conflict outside of herself.

Conversely, several participants brought up a variety of scenarios where they disagreed with the perspective their employer or client was asking them to take, making the situation intractable for them. A former public information officer in a

branch of the U.S. military, now in public relations leadership role with a public company, described the process of enacting the repeal of the “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” as a particularly daunting challenge. While she strongly agreed with the repeal, many within the highly hierarchical military leadership did not, making it personally and professionally very difficult for her to successfully execute her part of the revised policy’s rollout.

***Personal narratives: Heroines and villains.*** Even when speaking about work from decades past or projects that ultimately failed, practitioners often portrayed their role in managing intractable problems as having personally done “the right thing,” even if it was a difficult choice. Often this was due to perceiving their work as part of a broader, positive societal direction. These recurring understandings speak to the need for practitioners—as professionals and members of professional organizations<sup>9</sup>—to find positive meaning in their personal narrative. That said, practitioners gave themselves latitude for these values, understanding that they were not always (or often) in a position to critique or push back against superiors or clients in their organization, or did not always have control over the final decisions made.

One participant, who had been a part of highway safety advocacy efforts earlier in her career, spoke to the crucial role of her work: “Our goal was to save lives.” For her, even though the advocacy work was difficult and the results took

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<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of participants are PRSA members, and many achieved the APR, meaning they embraced—at least for the process—a specific set of values regarding what is and is not excellent public relations. While this definition allows for some space regarding the importance of advocating for our clients, it sets hard ethical boundaries in terms of our responsibilities as practitioners to journalists, citizens, and the public sphere.

years to accumulate—in part because car safety features only affect new vehicles—the experience left its mark on her and, she felt, her work made a difference:

It's the most impactful thing I've ever done in my life. I knew that I would never, ever again have a job where I had that kind of impact. Somebody was telling me once early in my career, “well, you work in highway safety, you know you save lives. You never know how many or which ones, but you know you have.” And that's a really wonderful feeling.

Other practitioners expressed a similar, if less direct, path to finding the positive nature of contentious work. Several participants working in and for hospitals expressed that their community relations efforts, while often grueling and intractable, served the public good of their regions over the long term. The public relations director for a “hard line” private evangelical university saw his work in combating gay activists on campus as “an opportunity to speak truth to people who are struggling.” He perceived this work as both mission-driven as well as part of what differentiated the university from its peer institutions. Several practitioners who worked with nonprofit credit unions made the point that they were helping people improve their finances, as opposed to big banks, which—the participants felt—were more likely to be taking advantage of consumers. In each of these cases, practitioners saw being on the right side of the issue as a personal imperative.

It is important to note that not one of the 41 participants framed their work as only being for the paycheck or to advance their organizations’ interests at any cost. Each described their work on contentious issues as making, from their perspective, a positive contribution. Sometimes the antagonist in their story was an external

organization, an activist public, an impetuous client, or a less-than knowledgeable community. At other times, the challenge came from within the organization. This could include management, unions, boards of directors, or other stakeholders. Of course, participants' counsel and advice on such issues was not always taken. As one university practitioner explained,

One thing that I do that probably gets me in trouble sometimes, I am not afraid to at least voice an opinion and say, "you know, I think this is probably not the right way to go or, have you considered that this could be a problem?" I feel like as a PR practitioner, especially with my APR, that's my job, that's my responsibility. Ethically, that is what I have to do if I see a potential problem.

If somebody doesn't listen, that's okay too. I mean, I at least tried.

Participants valued this counselor role as having an important extra-organizational perspective on intractable issues. In their minds, whether this was taken into account or not, at least the leaders of organizations would have a more complete sense of the decisions they made.

***Coping with personal intractability.*** Several participants explained that they used coping approaches when dealing with the stress of intractable problems at work. For a public school district's public information officer, this came in the form of her attitude. "I think that a healthy sense of optimism goes a long way," she said. "For me, when you believe in the mission and vision of your organization, it's not as hard. I truly am there to, not only just help children, but to help children who need us." Despite a multitude of organizational challenges, she perceived her work as helping students—particularly under circumstances where organizational challenges could

have a direct impact on the quality of education. This sense of identity allowed her to withstand such issues longer than many other staff members of the organization, but also took their personal toll:

That's what sustains me and helps me see beyond a path to all of the dysfunctional things that I have to navigate every day. But, sometimes, I think, it does get weary. You have to take a break. Sometimes you have to go to a therapist. You have to go to church. You have to get that extended vacation. Grab that extra muffin. Go to that concert. You have to find ways to balance between the dysfunctional work environment and having a very clear sense of self beyond all those things.

For some practitioners, similar scenarios caused them to “fire” a client, leave the organization or, at least, begin the process of finding new employment. Yet, for others, including this participant, the personal value of her work with the school district and its students, despite its near-constant intractability, made the effort worth it.

## **RQ2: How, if at all, Do Public Relations Practitioners Understand Agonism and Dissensus to Be a Part of Their Communication Efforts?**

While practitioners did not use the terms *dissensus* or agonism to describe their perspectives or actions while managing intractability, many of their stories reflected characteristics of these concepts. Dissensus is a perspective for communicating that embraces and prioritizes differences and discord without necessarily attempting to find common ground among stakeholders, while agonism represents the tactics that allow for such engagement (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012;

Mouffe, 1998). Agonistic practices see conflict as central to public relations in contentious scenarios. In this context, intractable scenarios involve complex, solution-resistant, challenging-to-identify, ambiguous, and contentious problems or issues. Agonistic approaches characterized many of the non-consensus tactics used in these situations, while an awareness or acceptance of dissensus informed practitioner perspectives. This research question reflects the importance of practitioner understandings to consider where, when, and why they utilize agonistic approaches in their own work.

Practitioners clearly identified dissensual perspectives and agonistic practices as a part of their public relations efforts. Some saw dissensual mindsets or scenarios as a challenge to be overcome, others found it to be a fact of life as part of intractable problems, and several embraced it as part of the core purpose of public relations. Practitioners practiced agonism in a variety of public relations' subdisciplines, including seemingly opposite perspectives: relational approaches and negotiation, issues management and crisis communication, as well as branding and marketing. Most often, practitioners understood the potential for public relations to serve organizations beyond a communication function, acting as a window to complex external environments and, potentially, a conscience for helping to navigate an uncertain world. For participants, conclusions were not easy to reach. Many quotes convey practitioner hesitancy in answering some of these questions—capturing the difficulty of discussing agonism, dissensus, and intractability and as part of praxis. Major themes that emerged included the *inevitability of agonism*, *agonistic engagement*, *agonistic tactics*, the *value of acknowledgement* and *paths to consensus*.

**Inevitability of agonism.** Many participants spoke to the ever-present possibility of agonistic discourse to arise in their day-to-day work. While more common in some industries (such as with trade associations and political advocacy) than others (such as business-to-business companies), practitioners recognized how their organizations or clients could go from seemingly innocuous circumstances to intractable scenarios quickly, triggering a dissensual perspective. Multiple participants made the point that, if not everyone can be convinced of a certain viewpoint, practitioners must be able to operate within a dissensus mindset—recognizing and accepting that not everyone will agree with them or their organizations.

One practitioner with extensive international experience described his work within the overlapping worlds of public relations, marketing, and government relations or public affairs. In this sense, he saw himself within the issues management realm, but identified first as a public relations practitioner. Working as a consultant with a for-profit university, he explained the need for agonism as a response to a worsening regulatory and news environment toward the industry:

Yes, we wanted to help [the company] recruit more students, but it was almost from a defensive standpoint. We didn't want people to run away because they were reading all these bad headlines. So who was the ultimate audience for that sort of ongoing program, it was frankly the Obama administration and Congress. So a lot of the work we did, was ultimately—we intended it to reach them.

This practitioner's work demonstrated that public relations with characteristics of agonism was at least as much about supporting organizational freedom (in his work, from government regulation or activist publics) as it was about marketing. While this varied based on organization or client type, many practitioners spoke to the issues management role as directly impacting relationships with public-sector stakeholders.

Particularly when working on public communication regarding contentious issues such as health care, practitioners expressed difficulty in connecting with politically polarized individuals. A governmental practitioner in the Northeast explained that, when communicating with local residents about polarized issues including Medicare and the Affordable Care Act, she had to utilize agonistic approaches and disagree with certain publics as part of the job:

It's really, for me, it's explaining it, just telling the truth. If someone hears the truth and they don't want to hear it, there's nothing I can do. But I'm all about the truth and complete transparency. We're not getting anything out of this, this is the deal. We're all bipartisan, we just doing what's right for the seniors and for people who need help.

This practitioner's positionality was telling. As a government communicator, her job was to get seniors enrolled in programs that would benefit them—not a matter of financial or personal gain. Engaging with community members regarding this particular intractable issue is part of her professional responsibility. Several practitioners noted that the added awareness of similar civic responsibilities was positive for the field as a whole.



In this vein, multiple participants referred to the political climate and attitude toward news in the U.S. as a contributing factor in discussing challenging issues. This made work more difficult, but, as one participant explained, also motivated public relations practitioners to aim for a higher professional standard:

I think part of that trust and credibility for the practitioners is, as storytellers, we're used to setting the agenda and what is truth. In this new era of trust and credibility crisis, we now have to qualify the very veracity of truth itself. We have to really cite our sources, contribute, to really disclose and be transparent about our own context around the content. I think that's something new. I think journalists already do this. I think PR practitioners aren't used to having to do this. It makes us uncomfortable.

For these participants, telling the truth against headwinds of falsehoods constituted an important, if unanticipated, form of agonistic communication in an environment of dissensus.

**Agonistic engagement: A double-edged sword.** While the majority of the descriptions of agonistic engagement were negative, including actions practitioners actively avoided, attempted to end, or qualified as temporary, others pointed to the potentially positive side of this part of the practice. Several participants couched their work on intractable problems in terms of negotiation or deal-making, while others emphasized improving interactions with important stakeholders. Taking stances on intractable issues, often requiring agonistic approaches, was viewed by practitioners as an increasingly popular stance for many organizations. One agency leader explained that, for her, “this is like a fundamental consumer expectation now. That a

company will know what it stands for and what it doesn't. And it's interesting because, you know, it can be very risky for them or very beneficial.” Making matters even more urgent, she added that “standing for nothing is a risk in and of itself.” In this way, practitioners understood communication in a dissensual environment proved both potentially valuable, as well as complex and risk-laden.

Several practitioners alluded to the potential marketing or brand value of antagonistic positions on polarizing issues. A regional agency professional qualified her argument by adding, “maybe I'm just being a little too mercenary about this, but I guess I would like to think that by taking a public stance that it might have some direct business benefit.” She continued with an incisive attack on organizations taking polarizing stances without a clear purpose:

I mean, again, I just can't imagine why a company would do it necessarily totally and completely out of the goodness of their heart unless they thought this was going to have some positive impact on their business. I guess I would be looking at business impact. You know, “did this help us any? Did it create more loyal customers? Did it bring us customers that we didn't have before?” You know, I think that has to be an important part of the conversation. And, as I said before, the last thing you want to do is do something that you put some portion of your loyal customer base in jeopardy because of a particular point of view you decided to take.

For this participant, and multiple others, the primary focus of organizations is (and should be) to serve their stakeholders and fulfill their mission. Any stance that deviates from those core purposes is irrational. The concept of “values” will be

discussed in more detail in reference to the third research question, but these practitioners were ardent that organizations pursued dissensual stances and tactics because of their benefits: additional profit, publicity, energizing stakeholders, and strengthening or more clearly differentiating brands. Several of these practitioners counseled clients regarding the danger of taking such stances only for the publicity or marketing value, particularly when it did not clearly align with organizational missions and values. This reflected contradiction within the enactment of values—some practitioners prioritizing organizational interests, while others focused on publics’ and stakeholders’ needs.

Participants also made the case that some seemingly brave or risk-laden stances were actually relatively mundane brand positioning points. “The right thing” to do could also be savvy marketing. Organizations (increasingly, corporations) were characterized as taking such stances to gain attention with deceptively little risk. Similarly, several practitioners brought up Nike<sup>10</sup> and Colin Kaepernick in this context. In their understanding, rather than being a risk, Nike’s seemingly provocative stance was a reflection of brand values and an opportunity to further conversation and discussion about the brand. Engagement in, for example, the debates around race, social justice, the national anthem, and the NFL could be polarizing. But it also reflected a targeted approach toward what could be seen as the brand’s core consumers, a differentiator from similar brands, an effective play for publicity, and strategic uses of a dissensus perspective and agonistic tactics.

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<sup>10</sup> No participants were actively working for or consulting with Nike.

From the perspective of a brand targeted by activists, one participant shared her admiration for dissensual work pointed toward her corporation. As part of her global company's union negotiations,

we weren't trying to build relationships with the SEIU<sup>11</sup>. But our labor relations folks were certainly in communication with them the entire time. I mean, it is a relationship, but it was really more a negotiation where there was a relationship involved because that's the only way you could negotiate.

In this particular labor dispute, she expressed her respect for the effectiveness of the union's tactics, explaining that "they were antagonizing us to get our attention." It worked. This experience emphasized the need to keep the lines of communication open, but that, at a certain point, the organization's goal could no longer be to strengthen the relationship. It had to turn to its best interests as part of the negotiation. From her perspective, union activists smartly utilized agonistic tactics to force management to improve their circumstances. While she did not necessarily agree with the approach, she clearly recognized and respected its effectiveness.

Another opinion mentioned by a minority of participants, came in the form of the financial benefits of ongoing agonistic engagement for consultants. Public relations consultants make money when their clients need engagement or face conflict. Much like opposing lobbyists that could be perceived, cynically, as extending a particular confrontation so that they could prolong monthly retainer payments, multiple participants hinted at the profitability of conflict as a potential driver for antagonism in public relations. As one participant explained: "There's a lot

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<sup>11</sup> Service Employees International Union

of money to be made raging in an ongoing battle.” While this veteran public affairs practitioner was the only participant to present this perspective bluntly, it provided valuable insights. His experiences and clients included global retail brands, a global agency, and multiple for-profit higher education institutions. He explained that he would counsel his clients and employer organizations toward dialogue, and felt that it was his professional duty to suggest it. Yet, the nature of for-profit consulting and agency economics can, potentially, get in the way:

There's a lot more money to be made as a PR agency fighting a fight.

Announcing a campaign, getting into issues, and frankly it was the [for-profit university] people who wanted to fight, fight, fight. We came up with ideas on how to fight, fight, fight, but I remember even saying at one point, “why don't we go sit down with these people that-,” whatever, and they looked at me like I was a traitor, right?

While his ethics pointed toward conciliation, for him, the evidence was clear as to why many practitioners embraced antagonistic approaches to their practice: It was to their financial benefit. The next theme elaborates on several tactics used as part of agonistic engagement.

**Agonistic tactics.** Several agonistic tactics brought up by multiple participants included *self defense*, *fueling supporters*, and *providing space for dissent*. Each of these three approaches were explained in a dissensual context: Practitioners were not looking for consensus, but actively encouraging disagreement. *Self defense*, the response to external provocations, was mentioned multiple times as a legitimate reason for antagonistic engagement. *Fueling supporters* included agonistic and

antagonistic messages aimed to divide publics for the organization's or stakeholders' benefit. *Providing space for dissent* involved allowing the opposition on contentious issues to have a voice, whether or not the organization is interested in shifting its position on the issue at hand.

When challenged, there are many circumstances for which a response is warranted. Participants considered *self defense* a reasonable tactic in intractable situations, under the right circumstances. As one participant shared, drawing upon several decades of trade association experience, "You have to respond quickly. You can't allow your opponent to define the issue. You've got to be out front to define the issue and you have to respond when attacked." That said, not all situations call for a response. Practitioners balanced accuser credibility, the truthfulness of the claims, and the potential exposure or risk to the organization when deciding whether to engage. As one agency owner explained, in some cases, "If you fan that flame, now you've got a wildfire and now it's my problem. I just leave it alone." *Self defense* can point toward engagement, but retaliation is not always the best approach. Several practitioners mentioned wide power differentials as an example: A large corporation, a government agency, or a global nonprofit should be careful about engagement with individuals attacking them, as their engagement has the opportunity to (1) give additional visibility to an antagonistic individual and (2) portrays the powerful organization as picking on a less-powerful individual or group.

Participants also demonstrated the use of agonistic approaches when antagonizing one public in order to encourage or support another. *Fueling supporters* took on a number of forms. For example, one nonprofit practitioner explained that,

when attacked, “some people use that type of antagonist as a way to fundraise and go, ‘help us to continue to defend ourselves.’” Such engagement was designed not to change minds, but deepen the connection with existing supporters by pointing to a common enemy and immediate need. Fundraising and volunteer recruitment were reiterated as motivators for nonprofits. Advocacy organizations, in particular, utilized this tactic to encourage voting and public support of initiatives. Corporate practitioners were less likely to support similar approaches and more likely to emphasize caution and risk avoidance.

*Providing space for dissent* was demonstrated by several practitioners who employed tactics of allowing opposing voices to speak publicly. One participant worked early in her career in the public relations department for a major global sporting event. The location where the event was held had, at the time (1990s), an “anti-gay ordinance” that attracted significant protest from gay rights organizations. She described, despite personal reservations against the ordinance, needing to find a way for the event to continue uninterrupted. The solution involved designating an area for protest that allowed for some national and global visibility without detracting from the event itself:

We created a place for them to protest if they wanted too, meaning we enabled it. And that was another way of dealing with it. We created an area where they were allowed to protest. But we didn't allow them to just, like, storm the stage or ruin the moment for all those families that had come (to enjoy the sporting event).

While not common, several practitioners mentioned similar ideas of allocating space for dissent as part of their work and part of the role of public relations. In this way, they and their response embodied a sentiment expressed by many practitioners—and elaborated in the next theme: that effective communication from a dissensus perspective involves acknowledging discordant opinions.

**Value of acknowledgment.** Practitioners emphasized the importance of coming to terms with agonism and disagreement—of understanding that not every mind could be changed—and being able to work within intractable situations more effectively because of this knowledge. Repeatedly, while referencing dialogue, listening, engagement, and compromise as the most important approaches for their organizations or clients, participants fell back on some version of the following sentiment: *But, you cannot change everyone's minds*. What to do with these unchangeable minds? For a participant in educational publishing, *acknowledgement* formed the core of her approach: “I don't think it's completely ignoring them. It's definitely acknowledging. We acknowledge them, but we don't again invest a ton of resources and energy into trying to change their opinion or their perception of the way it is.” Similarly, a B2B practitioner in the financial industry explained, “There's always going to be a disaffected group, no matter what. When you're looking at the metrics of who your target demographics are and who's coming behind them, you get a general sense of where their interests are, where their passions are.” As a veteran agency practitioner with experience on contentious real estate development projects shared,



You've gotta look and help the leaders see strategically what the goal really is. Because, a lot of times, the leaders will see things, especially in the public sector, or in a regulated industry—“ we need to win over all of these people.” If they understand what you do and even respect you, that is almost passive support but you don't need them to come out and say “oh, we support you.” If they're just quiet about it and going about their normal day, you win.

In these ways, practitioners expressed the dissensus found living within intractable environments on a daily basis.

Even within this space of acknowledgment, participants often struggled to find the vocabulary to express agonistic approaches and dissensual perspectives. Speaking about standardized testing, a practitioner with a for-profit publisher hesitated in describing the ways in which the organization managed communication on this contentious issue:

I think it's so hard. It's tough because it's hard to, if you have someone that's, for example, complete anti-testing—maybe you'll change their mind, but the odds of doing that are pretty low. I think you have to pick your battles. As an organization, I think we have to do that sometimes as well because we know that we're not going to convince everyone. We're not going to win everything. But I think all we can do, and what we should be responsible for, is just at least sharing and getting out our position and the information, and then letting people do with it what they will.

Such agonistic engagement is not necessarily focused on changing awareness, opinions, or behaviors, but instead on reflecting organizational values.

**Path(s) to consensus.** Agonistic communication within the context of intractable situations was also portrayed as a means to the end of consensus or resolution. While not possible in all circumstances or always the goal, multiple participants referenced advocacy and agonistic approaches as reasonable (and potentially helpful) steps on the road to de-escalating contentious scenarios. “I think PR by its very nature is the resolution of contention,” said one veteran practitioner and agency owner. Multiple participants expressed this view of public relations—reducing antagonism among organizations.

A practitioner in public education explained that, “as chaotic as that back-and-forth process is, that’s how you build consensus so that, even when people do not agree with the outcome, they can say, ‘well, at least you asked. We tried. I see your point.’ That’s what great communication can do.” Agonism demonstrates engagement. The time and effort taken to disagree still may have meaning and value for publics. In a hospital setting, a participant explained that the intractability around keeping or eliminating a specific service would never be resolved:

It's a negotiation where you start off by saying, so tell me what words you absolutely have to have as part of the agreement, and what words you absolutely can have. And then you work around those. And I think in a sense that's what we did. We figured it out amongst ourselves: What absolutely has to be part of this and what absolutely can't be part of it? Now that we understand that, how can we address the issue by meeting everybody's needs? Were there people unhappy? Yes. Did it become a major issue? I think within a couple days, it was not a major issue.

Such stories emphasized the continua existing between complete agreement and full intractability. For multiple participants managing intractable issues, the value of public relations, agonistic communication, and dissensual perspectives was measured in moving an issue several steps from intractability toward agreement.

### **RQ3: What Best Practices do Practitioners Believe They Should Follow When Faced with Intractable Problems?**

While public relations scholarship and theory building has largely followed consensus-focused best practices, practitioners facing intractable issues and managing wicked problems present an opportunity to gather a wider range of perspectives. Best practices, both as recommended and as demonstrated by practitioners, reflected the range of intractability experienced by organizations as well as the commonalities of professional norms. Participants acknowledged the expectations to listen and work to understand their organization's publics, but also to actively and visibly demonstrate engagement. Decisions of whether (and how) to engage with publics shifted drastically based on the organization's circumstances. Practitioners were able to easily justify moving among distinct approaches at different points in managing a specific contentious issue.

The results reflected a variety of themes. The first four demonstrate different types of engagement, while a fifth emphasized practitioners' willingness to adjust their approach to meet the situation: *collaborative engagement*, *acceptance*, *quiet antagonism*, and *engaged agonism*, utilized through *flexible engagement*. These represented the approaches to managing intractable problems typified by participant responses. Each includes an example tactic presented by a participant. Next,

*managing complexity* reflects the common challenges and solutions to communicating in complex environments around nuanced issues. The final two themes, *organizational values* and *professional values*, point toward the crucial role of values in decision-making by participants. Practitioners agreed that organizations should act in light of their mission and values. Whether or not they believed that organizations should be more engaged in contentious, intractable issues on the whole, all acknowledged that organizations should work to follow their stated values. Yet, organizational values could also run counter to the personal or professional values of practitioners as well as to those of publics and stakeholders. Participants supplied a variety of best practices for managing these challenges.

**Collaborative engagement.** The first set of best practices reflected a relationship- or consensus-centric approach to engagement. Organizations facing contentious issues through compromise, dialogue, and convergence (or professing to) prioritized reasonableness and showed an aversion to coming across as negative, selfish, or destructive. The majority of participants expressed a strong reluctance to portray their organizations as anything other than reflective of the values of good governance and good citizenship: listening, openness, positivity, and willingness to make changes given external input. Practitioners described challenging others within their organizations or clients to avoid combative or antagonistic discourse. Yet, there seemed to be an understanding that certain situations require at least an agonistic approach rather than a wholly consensus-based perspective. One practitioner from a leading global agency explained that her first approach when managing contentious issues would be opening up dialogue between or among those who disagree: “If you

can get the dialogue going, you can get to some human understanding and some commonalities. And that's in everyone's best interest. It's not always possible.”

Organizations worked to promote their values and find the best ways to work with others to achieve organizational ends, including building strong relationships with leaders in their communities and empowering supporters. According to multiple practitioners, they should ask, as one participant did, “Do you have a ready group of ambassadors or champions?” A practitioner at a semi-rural hospital described the slow process of bringing community leaders into the fold. For residents often distrustful of intervention and with low high-speed internet penetration (just above 50%), many widespread approaches were less effective than partnering with established local organizations to promote community health initiatives:

I want to say it was about a year, maybe a bit more than that to get to that point, and it was slow and it was grueling and there were days when you take one step forward and it would be two steps back. But, I think the end result was an example of simple, old fashioned collaboration. The PR side was that we wanted to make sure people knew about the collaboration. That people knew about the value of that collaboration. That all the parties within the collaboration are also empowered to talk about their collaboration.

Many participants described such coalition building as a crucial part of their efforts and a best practice.

***Example tactic: Inclusive advocacy.*** Advocating for an organization’s issue stance did not necessarily limit practitioners to agonistic or antagonistic approaches. Advocacy could be approached through collaboration and engagement with publics.

In an advocacy communication environment, a practitioner working for a financial industry association explained that its goals were best served by maintaining the moral high ground:

We want to go after payday lenders, but we can do it in a way where we don't have to attack them. We only want to win the hearts and minds of the individuals going to payday lenders with a better product or a better service, and by learning kind of from the payday lending model, or how they approach their market and their target demographic, we need to kind of expand our own knowledge and what appeals to that group of individuals.

Winning over consumers, from his perspective, was not about attacking their past behaviors and associations, but by showing them a different way. It was about a deep understanding of their perspectives and adjustment of organizational messaging and behavior to reflect these publics. From the perspective of a nonprofit with a clear pro-social agenda, this meant both a commitment to underlying values while coordinating and adjusting their actions with publics in mind.

While many practitioners shared similar stories of mutual engagement or attempted dialogue and compromise, multiple participants provided examples of the effectiveness and appropriateness for both less engaged and more agonistic approaches within their practice. The next sections will explore these alternatives.

**Acceptance.** In addition to engagement, participants demonstrated a variety of degrees of disengagement with contentious issues. On one end of the spectrum was the practitioner and organization taking an approach reflective of accommodation or conciliation. In some cases, this reflected practitioners acknowledging that they were

going to prevail on a specific issue, letting others in a coalition do the work of negotiating or advocating on their behalf, or staying out of an issue even when they disagreed with the direction it was headed. Practitioners exemplifying this stance included an agency leader who described the office's work to be inclusive of multiple viewpoints on a given issue within the same industry team as well as a financial institution that, despite progressive internal policies, opted out of a public fight in their Southern city over discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Not engaging could also show power and confidence for organizations. A D.C.-based mid-career agency practitioner explained his choice of non-engagement for an education-industry client by saying

Ultimately for us, we recognize we have more advocates than we do detractors, and so ultimately when we empower our advocates with the correct information their voices stand out more so than the voice our detractors, kind of what we've found.

From this perspective, not needing to take part in debates on a specific issue was the best reflection of the organization's already strong position.

***Example tactic: Diffusion through conversation.*** Similarly, multiple participants described the virtues of conversation with publics and the act of listening. They described the benefits of “hearing out” opposing sides regarding intractable problems. This, it should be clear, is distinct from a fully dialogic listening posture or attempts at negotiation, which necessitates a willingness to change position. Practitioners spoke to the benefits of maintaining an openness to converse, if not fully engaging. According to a senior practitioner in the healthcare industry, a veteran of

many intractable community issues, “The knee jerk reaction should always be for a company to be open to conversation. Because, that's brand management 101: That a brand is defined in the conversations with your constituents.” For him, such conversations generally served to help stakeholders understand the organization's position, even if they did not go as far as looking to shift the organization's position based on additional understanding of external perspectives.

Other practitioners emphasized the importance of public learning about the viewpoint of the organization's employees in conjunction with organizational insights about external publics. Mutuality, in this space, was recommended as best achieved through interpersonal conversation, rather than public discourse. The vice president of communication for a global staffing company explained that connecting in more private spaces and places was always preferable to public battles:

I would have a stance of understanding and respecting their views. And rather than say, “we're right and you're wrong,” create a space where there's room for local opinions and understand that you probably won't convince them that you're right therefore they should stop their activism. But somehow, you know, come to an understanding of, “we have different views on this and there's room for both. There's room for our company and what we're doing. Therefore there's no threat to you in our company.” And see where that goes. I mean, I'm always a fan of sitting down with groups to have those kinds of conversations rather than fighting it out in the media or something. And see where that goes. I think that is what public relations should do. You know,



like really try to form two-way communication in all its forms, especially person-to-person.

This practitioner saw both the possibility and the benefits of having such conversations without necessarily imposing an organizational view, although there is not much room for negotiation in the quote above. She was not describing two-way symmetrical communication in its scholarly definition. Instead, terms such as *two-way communication*, *listening*, and *dialogue*, terms used by participants in many of these examples, act as ways to convince external stakeholders of the validity, if not the supremacy or inevitability, of the organization's stance. While not a proactive public relations tactic in the traditional sense, this represents a strategic choice to work toward diffusing an intractable issue through listening, rather than truly engaging to find compromise or more actively working to change awareness, opinions, or behaviors of publics through communication. Well-meaning practitioners demonstrated this approach, but may not have realized its implications, particularly within the wide gaps in power between large organizations and less-powerful publics.

**Quiet antagonism.** Another choice several participants described was staying silent on issues where the organization did disagree with a prevailing view or perspective. Often, organizations either faced certain issues internally or stayed quiet knowing that there was no clear benefit from taking a stand. Contrary to the previous theme, *quiet antagonism* reflects the many scenarios where organizations prefer to avoid contentious issues, despite opportunities to take a position. Rather than accepting the fate an issue might take, this may translate into private efforts to address the situation, such as lobbying, rather than through public discourse. In this

way, organizations positioned themselves as being open to compromise and dialogue, but were more often quietly antagonizing their opposition.

In its most socially beneficial incarnation, this approach encouraged participants to focus on the most important objectives at hand, avoiding getting bogged down in the impossible process of winning over every stakeholder on every issue. According to a senior agency practitioner, who had practiced extensively in the Midwest and Southeast,

If your goal is that everybody will love you and support you, that's unrealistic.

And really, I need 50% plus 1... you've got a very vocal minority that is really going to hate you. You're never going to win them over, but, if you can—not necessarily silence them—but minimize their disruption and get just a handful of very vocal allies, you balance them out. The vast majority of folks really see themselves not having a dog in the fight. If they stay neutral, you win.

This perspective realistically minimizes aspirations for consensus and moves toward a protectionist stance: Avoiding conflict and engagement while attempting to maintain the status quo for an organization.

***Example tactic: “Deflect and redirect”.*** Several practitioners described reframing or attempting to reframe narratives to ensure the organizational perspective was made clear. One clear example of this stance came from the public relations vice president for a large pharmaceutical company, as part of his description of media relations challenges. The company did not want to discuss the complex issues of drug pricing, instead adopting an approach to “deflect and redirect the price aspect of a story to a value perspective.” He explained that he carefully vetted media inquiries,

focusing on reporters seemingly willing to put in the effort to understand his perspective, and avoiding those that did not. He regularly receives calls for “set up” stories, where a reporter alerts him to a story posting in 30 minutes and asks for a comment. He described this practice as unfair, particularly when it was clearly a complex and heavily investigated article with weeks or months of time invested. Why not ask the organization to respond in a way that allowed them to provide its full perspective? Because of such experiences, he explained that he prioritizes cultivating relationships with a few reporters who have invested the time to understand the industry’s complexity and provide fair opportunities for response. Thus the organization actively avoided engagement where they could not provide what they considered a balanced perspective. While not full disengagement, this strategy seeks to avoid discussing the most conflict-laden scenarios. If a reporter is not willing to provide a reasonable opportunity for mutual understanding, it is preferable to not engage. This approach does ensure that some reporting and news writing about the organization does not have the organization’s voice, by doing so limiting the opportunity to learn from additional criticisms and connect with additional publics.

**Engaged agonism.** Organizations cannot always find mutually agreeable solutions to intractable problems. In a variety of these cases, participants described using public relations for purposes of dissensus or agonistic engagement. While it was relatively common in political or advocacy settings (lobbying-related efforts, referenda, etc.), it was less common and sometimes difficult to describe within the context of media relations or community relations. Practitioners had a variety of perspectives for explaining the best practices of this type of agonistic engagement.

A regional manager of communication and public relations for a large telecom company faced a similar challenge in describing the importance of new cellular technology for a community. In talking to a local reporter about the installation of a new, prominent piece of telecommunication equipment in a town in the southwest,

I explained all these items to him, really the last conversation I had with him was, “I understand you're doing your job, I understand the people are talking, they want their voice to be heard, but the reality is, the way their city is set up, it's on the city to approve or not approve. It's not the citizen's ... They don't have a ... In this particular part of the process and to be honest with you, they don't have a voice in the process at all.” So while they are kind of attacking [the telecommunication company], the reality is, we are operating within the system that is in place. And we're doing the right thing. I understand that they're upset and they would like the system to be different, but you really can't fault us.

The organization, in the eyes of the practitioner, had done all that it could. It was doing what leadership felt was best for the organization as well as best for the community and providing a rationale for these actions—even if the community disagreed.

Other examples of engaged agonism included a practitioner advocating against payday lenders at the state level on behalf of a nonprofit and a governmental affairs practitioner supporting healthcare access for seniors—often through one-on-one conversations attempting to convince those with anti-government viewpoints to take advantage of state-funded medical services. The evangelical university

practitioner's stance clear, public stance against gay-right alumni also demonstrated this perspective. In the for-profit realm, this theme was exemplified by several aforementioned scenarios such as the international hospitality company managing a labor union negotiation as well as the real estate company a practitioner advocated for in terms of local regulations and approvals.

***Example tactic: Visible effort.*** Not only did participants recommend attempting to communicate with publics—even when they seemed to be diametrically or fundamentally opposed to the organization's point of view—but many pointed to the value of making these attempts public. The process of public response stood out as an important best practice. An agency practitioner who has worked in a number of contentious industries explained, when considering taking on a new challenge or client, "I think we will have to understand detractors. Who are these people? Can we talk with them? Can we change their minds? I think the answer will be no, but it's still a movement that we need to go to. It's due process." Again and again, the importance of engagement in the context of intractability was emphasized, even if it would not change opinions.

One community relations example featured a participant—an experienced practitioner with a regional hospital, caught in an argument regarding a seemingly mundane issue: a proposed temporary parking lot. Looking to expand the hospital with a new wing and parking deck, the organization needed to find temporary parking for hundreds of employees during the construction period. The best plan they could devise involved paving over an open lot six blocks away and busing employees to the

hospital, but a number of neighborhood community members were not pleased.

According to the participant,

We did everything we could to reach out, and they just didn't want to talk to us. No matter what we said. "It's a great idea, but don't do it here." And so at that point it became a question of, we can't convince them to support it, so we'll do everything we can at least to go into the public to show we've tried, and we're doing all these extra steps to make it as the least intrusive that we can, but this is one of the prices of progress, and the outcome will be, et cetera, et cetera. So that was a no win for the neighbors. But again, I think the community looked and said, "okay, we understand." And I think that's what we were looking for, is the acknowledgement that we tried really hard.

Depending on the degree of intractability and the public, the approach of listening visibly was seen as having positive outcomes even without changing opinions or demonstrating a genuine willingness to change. It could be beneficial for other publics (such as demonstrating reasonableness and community engagement to energize existing supporters) or to deflate or otherwise mollify activists, as in the previous example.

**Flexible engagement.** Organizational approaches to intractability were not static. Actions depended on a wide variety of circumstances, including community expectations and the potential for productive conversations or negotiations. A community library practitioner explained her understanding of when to engage and not engage, straddling the line between active and passive approaches:

So I'm not going to jump into a conversation I see online if they haven't tagged us or if they haven't tried to engage us in a certain way, because I guess I just look at that as, I overheard your conversation, and I'm inserting myself. If they tag us, and they're like, "we hate this about you," at that point I feel like, okay, you've engaged with me. I need to defend myself and my organization. I need to put the facts out there, because I don't know who's looking at that. So if they're engaging me and I'm ignoring it, then that doesn't make us look good. So if they're engaging us, I'm definitely always going to engage back.

As exemplified here, the best and most appropriate response may shift regularly depending on the immediate situation.

Another perspective held by multiple participants was that the correct approach should be defined in part by the realistic outcomes. In this case, the potential for compromise or other mutually agreeable solutions should encourage practitioners to seek it. But, many argued, such consensus is not always possible. The vice president for communication for a U.S.-based global foundation, which occasionally finds itself managing contentious issues, explained that

If you feel like there's a road to compromise, then it would be worthwhile to engage them in a dialogue to see if both sides could get to a point where they could find a mutually acceptable position. Some issues, there will be those opportunities. Other issues there just won't.

Emphasizing the potential positive outcomes, this statement served as a representative example of the process many practitioners went through in deciding how to advise

their organizations or clients. Similarly, others focused more on minimizing the negative possibilities of engagement. As one veteran agency owner, based in the Southeast, explained,

If there's growing traction on the negative side that is overshadowing what we're trying to achieve, that's going to dictate what—I may have to retreat. I may have to pause for several months to deal with this. Knowing that it's not going to be 100% dealt with, but it has to get to a place where it's manageable, so that we can go forward with what's important.

This uses the term *manageable* to explain a situation in which the public relations function can set goals and objectives that are achievable. For this participant, among many others, putting themselves, their departments, and their organizations in a position to succeed meant selecting the appropriate approach based on a realistic best-case outcome.

The next section addresses the variety of additional themes and decisions brought up by participants, covering the centrality of complexity as well as an organizational and practitioner perspective on the role of values. These issues were reflective of multiple categories of engagement as noted above. While not universal, the following themes crossed a variety of industry, issue, and organization-type boundaries, making them somewhat representative of participant experiences.

**Managing complexity through translation.** Often, scenarios are intractable and invite antagonism in part due to their sheer complexity. Different vocabularies and perspectives, complicated issues, and the singular focus of specific issue groups



all underscore the importance and difficulty of communication on behalf of organizations in intractable scenarios. As one participant explained,

I think you have all of these different people, our stakeholders that speak these different languages. Maybe they speak—or not even speak, but just think one way and this other person thinks another way. I think as a PR professional, you have to take that all in and then come back in a way that other, just the general public or all of those people can understand. I think if something is not simple and clear, you run into having issues. But if you can make it straightforward and very clear, it's less of an issue.

Even this “simple” solution is deceptively complex. Practitioners underscored, and sometimes understated, the challenges of making a complicated situation “straightforward” for publics. This is a process that takes time, and a skill honed over decades of professional work, and not one that can serve as a quick fix. Practitioners are using a variety of tools to bridge this distance between issue complexity and public understanding.

The topic came up in a wide variety of contexts, including a pharmaceutical company practitioner often trapped in challenging media relations scenarios. He described being targeted by activist organizations attempting to spark exposé stories by sharing drug prices with sympathetic journalists. While he acknowledged the unfairness of the healthcare system and drug prices generally, he also described the extremely complex process of drug creation and upfront invest that goes into pricing. Rather than tackle such stories through sound-bite responses, he works to slow them down in order to help journalists understand the scale of the challenges. Generally, he

explained that the company was able to “reduce issues by educating.” On the other end of the organizational spectrum, many nonprofits faced similar challenges. One participant, who leads communication for an affordable housing group in the Midwest explained that

We spend a lot of our time trying to unpack very complex issues that aren't just black and white. There's lots of gray. And that's what I mean about the external groups. Usually they come to us with a single issue and we have to take a minute to explain to them and show them how housing and affordable housing fits within a great context of whether it's urban planning, whether it's policymaking, that sort of thing.

Within this framework, the practitioner found many traditional public relations approaches, including media relations, were insufficient in adequately conveying the intricacies of the issues at hand. For this nonprofit, a technology-rich paid advocacy strategy has been significantly more effective in bringing publics into the conversation:

We're up against a lot of noise. So we have deployed a communication strategy that focuses on using plain language, clear and concise communication, and that uses more graphics that almost gamify or entertain than previously we've done before.

This brings up a variety of related points: the growing technological capability and desirability of direct-to-consumer advocacy communication, the importance of an issues management mindset for a community-centered nonprofit, and the need to engage in agonistic communication as part of an organization's mission.

Other practitioners struggled to describe the complexity of their experiences as directly, clearly searching for the language to reflect their approach. For example, a veteran West Coast practitioner and agency owner vacillated among relationship focused and more antagonistic understandings of practice:

I think that you always try to come to a—I guess try to come to a win-win, try to express the facts that you have as you understand it, but listen too. And listen to their concerns, and listen to their, what they, where they're coming from and try to understand that and—You know, I think that—but understand, too that sometimes there's going to be points where you're right, you're going to have to—you're going to have to agree to disagree on certain things.

In this understanding—reflective of the struggles of multiple participants to express their positions—public relations does not fit neatly into one box or the other, but encompasses multiple approaches to understanding the interactions of publics and organizations. Multiple participants struggled to express these challenges of communicating beyond consensus, seemingly searching for language not within their professional vocabulary to describe these experiences. Some of these challenges were due to the following two themes: the incompatibility of non-consensus approaches with organizational values as well as professional or personal values.

**Organizational values.** Multiple participants focused on harnessing organizational values to drive decision-making while managing intractability. This encompassed the relationships between organizational and societal values, and emphasized the degree to which decision making should connect with the core mission of an organization. Practitioners described a variety of values their

organizations should embody. Among them, credibility and authenticity were described as crucial features for organizational success, which were supported by consistently mission-driven decisions. The communication director at a semi-rural Midwest hospital explained that, when an organization takes a public stance as part of an intractable scenario, “that organization also has to quote unquote ‘live the brand,’ and the further there's a gap between it, you know, the less credibility that organization has.” This has a variety of implications for best practices. For example, according to a mid-career higher education practitioner, their organization cannot make sudden moves without jeopardizing trust with its publics:

You can't, as a university, you can't change who you are based on which way the wind is blowing I guess. Everything that [a major Southwest public university] does—we get a new president, we get new deans, different leadership and stuff, but it doesn't change where we're located, it doesn't change the attitudes of the people around us; it doesn't change who our students are, in general.

Such changes could undermine established organizational values as perceived by stakeholders.

Practitioners spoke to the importance of understanding and embracing organizational core values across many different sectors. A participant from an affordable housing nonprofit in the Midwest explained that, at her organization,

We certainly don't engage in every debate or ever issue, every discussion. And there are times when it makes sense—our organization has a strategic plan. And so, we can say, “our strategic plan says this.” And we can tie it back to

our strategic plan and our board of directors and how they create the path for our organization. Does our strategic plan support engagement in that or does it not?

This sentiment was reiterated by practitioners across geographic, demographic and industry divides. Participants generally saw the role of organizations (relative to intractable issues) as enacting their values, and, potentially, engaging when appropriate. Of course, many distinctions in these values and their implications were reflected differently based on the categories described above.

While the vast majority practitioners speculated that major brands conducted significant research before identifying whether their stakeholders and consumers would embrace a particularly divisive stance on an intractable issue, the connection to values demonstrated that this was certainly not universal. One veteran agency and in-house public relations and branding practitioner had worked closely with a major apparel brand that had recently received significant coverage due to such a controversial issue stance. He described their decision-making process as a staunchly non-scientific exercise:

It's all done by feel, intuition, gut, heart, and they just have a very keen sense of who they are and who their customers are. I don't know that to be a fact, but I would be shocked if there was much research done about what they thought the reaction of this was going to be. I really would be.

When the organization released an ad supporting their stance, he added, "It wouldn't shock me if there was absolutely no research done on that ad or on that issue."

Such decisions can be complex, particularly as there is no clear cutoff for which stakeholders have input regarding an organization's values and their enactment. Should only the CEO or board of directors have input? Managers? Front line employees? Major donors and supporters? Customers? Community members? This complexity was referenced by one early career practitioner with experience in the automotive industry as well as in telecommunications. For her, the goal was to achieve balance: "It's always internal and external facing. So how do you make the right decisions for customers and how do you make the right decisions for employees? It's all about finding that balance." Thus, practitioners described their role as helping to understand such constituencies and help organizational leaders find the best route to following core values while balancing stakeholder perspectives.

What happens if a position does not meet these criteria? If not, participants questioned its value and explained that publics would do the same. As one longtime consultant explained, "I always counseled my clients that, 'are you banning the Styrofoam because you really believe that you're going to do a good thing, or are you banning the Styrofoam so you can get on the news and tell everybody how great you are?'" She elaborated that a multitude of problems were likely to descend when organizations take stances without a strong reason: "It can ring hollow." Similarly, an agency veteran based in the Southeast explained, "I think I would probably question any CEO, honestly, why get involved in a fight that doesn't affect you, in some way? Or, affect your audience?" She added, "why fight just to fight? Right?" These practitioners each demonstrated caution when organizations seemed inclined toward activism for activism's sake, rather than a clear connection to mission and values.

Yet, the growing expectations for corporate values as well as the shifting values of internal and external publics made such decisions less-than clear cut.

***Shifting societal expectations.*** Several practitioners made the case that their increasing willingness to engage in public discourse on polarizing, intractable issues stemmed from an increase in the scope of corporate values. Whereas organizations (particularly corporations) had in the past been singularly focused on profit or expansion, they saw a recognition of wider expectations from stakeholders as well as a broadening of expectations from corporate leaders. Such shifting expectations forced a reevaluation of the role of the corporation (and, in turn, public relations) in deciding whether or not and when to engage. An agency owner in the Southeast explained that, particularly for businesses, she saw such corporate engagement as a relatively new issue: “It was new for businesses to be having this discussion. Activists in the community have been having this discussion for many years, right? Politics, people in government, but not at the business level.”

This shift toward corporate engagement in potentially contentious situations seemed, to many participants, to be driven by shifting organizational values and prioritization of those values. A veteran practitioner, currently working for an apolitical business association, provided a valuable neutral vantage point:

I think it's really interesting to see companies taking more political positions. Now, some of them sort of sit with their mission. I think with Patagonia the other day said that they're taking all of their saving from the federal tax cuts and investing it into a climate change organization. They're not keeping the profits. They've decided that's a mission-driven thing for them to do. Now, to

be honest, they also got a hell of a lot of good publicity for it. Was it purely an altruistic thing to do? It was a smart thing to do. A mission-based decision that fit with their corporate culture.

Her explanation highlights a values-centered corporation making consistent, rational, and generally beneficial decisions (as measured by traditional corporate and public relations metrics), despite the contentious and, potentially, intractable issues.

**PR professional values.** In addition to the role of organizational values, participants reinforced traditional professional values within public relations and described their counselor role during intractable scenarios as working to uphold them. Such values include *transparency*, *objectivity*, *positivity*, and *neutrality*. Interestingly, participants shied away from explicitly describing advocacy activities in this context, falling back on more traditionally journalistic or public information-centric understandings of their role. Taken together, these sentiments emphasized that participants felt their (and their organizations') professional and societal credibility was even more directly at stake when managing intractable problems than in their day-to-day work.

***Transparency.*** Multiple practitioners asserted that, particularly in scenarios of collaboration or engaged agonism, being transparent with external and internal audiences is crucial. Public relations as a function can advocate for such transparency. In some cases, others inside the organization or client block such actions, but participants made the case that the public relations function needs to know what is going on and be able to share it in order to provide intelligent counsel and convey trust. Transparency inside the organization was mentioned as equally important.



Additionally, transparency can support trust-building with publics and, in some cases, be beneficial strategically. A veteran practitioner, who spent several decades managing external communication for a university research center before founding her own firm, explained that

Number one, transparency is essential. Your clients or your boss or the organization you're working for has to tell you with no bullshit exactly what's going on. And, they have to come clean with you and tell you everything because, as we know, it will eventually come out anyway and everyone will have to deal with it. So, transparency is essential. And, in the same token, if you can get to the other side and ask them to be quite candid with you about what the issues are. So, you're not totally in reactive mode, or just in reactive mode all the time, that would be a big help. I know sometimes you can, sometimes you can't.

In this way, transparency contributes to civil participation in contentious scenarios and, potentially, helps raise expectations for all parties participation. Several participants explained transparency as a shifting value: one where publics' expectations are climbing. A mid-career practitioner in public education explained the shift by saying that she understands the perspective of her community members as preferring more information when possible: "instead of just telling me what the budget priorities are, give me the whole budget." Practitioners must continually re-evaluate stakeholder expectations within the context of shifting societal values.

***Positivity.*** Another professional value mentioned by several participants was positivity. This reflected the majority of participant responses that emphasized

civility, listening, and graciousness in response to contentious issues, publics, or situations. One representative comment from a practitioner at a West Coast university-based think tank steeped in divisive issue discourse explained her strategy as focused on this visible effort to stay positive and

Probably after you've tried and tried a few times. If the other side at your third attempt says, "we're just never gonna agree," you know, "we're not at all interested in talking to you." Then, I still say, I leave the door open. I'll check with you again in a couple weeks, and hope that we can communicate clearly. I'm always positive. I'm really looking forward to that. And, that's of course why they pay us the big bucks. That's what we do, you know, we have to do that. Often the attorneys don't do it, but the public relations people do.

In this way, professionalism is reflected by avoiding antagonism and embracing positivity, even amid disagreement. Demonstrating positivity and an openness to, at minimum, hear concerns from antagonistic publics prioritizes managing conflict through discourse and attempting compromise and consensus.

***Neutrality and objectivity.*** When managing extremely divisive issues or divided audiences, multiple participants emphasized the importance of conveying neutrality and maintaining objectivity as crucial steps. Perceived neutrality could be utilized by both organizations and individual practitioners. This perspective helped participants avoid personal opinions become overwhelming (particularly for nonprofit or cause-related advocacy) as well as to ensure that they respected the humanity and dignity of publics across the issue spectrum.

Practitioners repeatedly described a best practice of utilizing data and facts when communicating in the midst of emotionally charged issues. Challenging incorrect characterizations with facts and data was a key tactic in the face of intractability. A consultant with a federal educational agency explained that “we’re not really allowed to express a point of view. Rather, what we can do is gain intelligence on what their arguments are, and then use that and combat it with the content strategy that kind of debunks those myths.” Some characterized factuality or allegiance to truth as a primary motivating force of their work, others as an effective response tactic or approach for de-escalation. Those supporting the latter perspective emphasized that organizations had public expectations of decorum higher than their publics. The spokesperson for an international business insurance company heavily involved with issues of climate change emphasized the “science-based” nature of both the organization’s management decisions and its external communication. From this perspective, having rational discussion, collaboration, and compromise requires setting aside emotion and focusing on the facts.

Similarly, a mid-career agency practitioner with government and association expertise explained that he believed

You should fight emotion with data. And then when you have the facts to back up your arguments, you can allow people to make up their own minds on whether or not they chose to believe you. If you’re fighting emotion with emotion, rightly there will be no solution to it, you’ll just be two people and two organizations with strongly differing viewpoints. And the public will

eventually realize that you're both biased, because neither of you have data or research that backs up your point.

He continued by saying that “you should come prepared with the facts. You should be able to educate your customer base that this issue does really affect a great number of people. Here are the facts behind it.” This stoic approach is reflective of a reputational or ethical motivation rather than a persuasive one—attempting to protect organizations’ reputations and credibility in a broad sense rather than attempting to argue the point at hand with all of the tools at their disposal.

One nonprofit practitioner explained that, from his perspective, “our missions are so important that even though I may not totally agree, the outcomes are much better when I maintain that neutrality.” Responses stressed the importance of a detached professionalism, both when working on issues within the organization as well as when communicating with publics. As one state government communicator (healthcare focus) in the northeast explained,

I think that you need to separate the issue from the person. If we have a group of seniors who we alienate and say, “you're numb as a stick, how can you not see that this is okay?” They're gonna need help at some point too. It's not about diametrically opposed personalities, it's really about what's right for the seniors. We approached it that way, just telling lots of stories.

Similarly, multiple participants emphasized the need to maintain credibility as a reason to default to neutrality on intractable or contentious issues. From this perspective, the decision to engage became a tug-of-war between the organizational values made salient by the issue at hand and the desired neutrality. As a veteran

agency practitioner from the great plains shared, “the board of directors had to make a decision if they were going to get in and go on the record on a very partisan, divisive issue. But, if we spoke to the pillars of the organization, then it was the right thing to do.” Throughout discussions of personal, professional, and organizational values, participants emphasized finding and maintaining connections between these values and the issue stances taken as part of intractable scenarios.

**RQ4: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of effectiveness, measurement, and evaluation in the context of intractability?**

Evaluation is a crucial part of public relations practice, as practitioners are driven by what they understand as constituting success. Intractable problems complicate traditionally black-and-white understandings of measurement. This research question begins the process of building robust and rich ways to evaluate in contentious situations based on practitioner experiences and perspectives.

Participants provided a variety ways to understand success and at least as many tools to measure and evaluate it. Such responses ranged from traditional public relations and media relations measurement practices (such as Barcelona Principles-style approaches) and crisis communication approaches (such as reputation management). They also included more nuanced and complex ideas about the growing challenges of defining victory when the voices of external stakeholders are growing in importance relative to the objectives of organizational leaders. Many of the responses to this research question expressed exasperation at the challenge of measuring and evaluating success broadly in public relations—a challenge only exacerbated in intractable scenarios. All participants expressed support for the value

and centrality of measurement to public relations and the management of intractable issues.

Practitioners made meaning of measurement within several distinct perspectives. Themes included *traditional metrics*, *returning to normal*, *managing risk*, *eye on the prize*, and *triple bottom line*. They reflect a range of responses, levels of measurement expertise, nuance, and available resources. In large part, they also reflect measuring public relations and engagement in intractable issues using the same perspective and tools as evaluating the rest of their work.

**Traditional metrics.** Many practitioners described utilizing standard public relations measurement tools for understanding news media (and social media) conversations about their organization, publics and stakeholders, as well as engagement and impact, during intractable situations. Hailing from a large think tank with the resources and expertise to manage a wide variety of measurement approaches, one participant described a focus on “the level of reach, influence and engagement that we're establishing with our audiences” for each of their programs. While this organization’s measurement reflected an organization-wide tendency toward quantification, this participant bemoaned the challenges of, for example, attempting to sort the value of media relations coverage around a contentious issue while attempting to integrate variables such as credibility, prestige, circulation, tone, and support of the organization’s advocacy efforts. And, of course, some of their issue campaigns targeted voters, while others targeted lawmakers, so no single solution could address all challenges.

A regional agency with some expertise in measurement, but not always the client will or commitment to provide the necessary resources, focused on relatively straightforward, clear-cut metrics for intractable situations:

I think a good outcome would be looking at polling and metrics that show how the issue is being perceived among the general audience. This is also your potential market and if you can see positive movement there that has market implications, I think that would be the biggest thing. I think if you are also able to point to different influential voices that you were able to get on board, that would be an important metric too. Whether that's editorial boards, editorials in publications, spokespeople, key influencers in other areas who are visible and articulating a position that's consistent with yours.

This approach reflects a media relations valuation of influencers (whether journalistic or social media-centered) as well as the understanding that public opinion and opinion change are central, both at the community or societal level and with opinion leaders and influencers.

Similarly, a local library practitioner emphasized the perception component to this measurement and the portrayal of the organization publicly, which could be particularly crucial in intractable situations: “Do we look like we did everything we could, or do we look like we were not helpful or something like that. So I do like to look at that third party perspective to say, well, I thought we did a bang up job, but this article really making it seem like we didn't do everything that we could.”

Each of these approaches reflects taking a standard public relations measurement tool and utilizing it as part of measuring success within contentious

contexts. The following themes push the boundaries of measurement a bit further beyond the reach of these standard approaches.

**Returning to normal.** Multiple participants characterized the purpose (and, by extension, the measurement) of managing intractable problems as returning to normal. In this way, practitioners evaluated the effectiveness of their efforts at managing intractability by considering the impact on their usual work and the standard operation of the organization. A practitioner with a major public university in the Midwest explained that, from her perspective, success in intractable scenarios is “getting things back to normal—getting things back to where you, your reputation, and your brand is still viable and you could move on from the situation.” One global agency veteran described his work in China with two American clients: a leading retailer and beer manufacturer. Both faced issues with counterfeit products and waning public trust: “I think initially they wanted to be able to return to ‘normal,’ whatever that was.” Practitioners understood normalcy as being able to focus on the standard day-to-day work of the organization and not have it be overwhelmed or upstaged by a contentious issue. For these organizations, normalcy was “the short-term measure of success.” These perspectives demonstrated a crisis-based understanding of these intractable scenarios: The complications involved in managing relationships with governments, gatekeepers, and consumers made it extremely difficult to balance competing demands. Another practitioner with a large global corporation explained that, for her, success is when “related operations can continue uninterrupted and communication can resume a more proactive rather than reactive, you know, strategic approach.” For complex organizations, crises may quickly



become intractable for practitioners, and normalcy provides the most obvious solution to return to a situation where multiple stakeholders could be satisfied and strategic objectives of the organization, not external groups, could be met.

This perspective spanned organizational types, including nonprofits. A healthcare practitioner, with experience in a range of nonprofit and advocacy settings, summed it up by explaining that “what's most important to us is our funders; that they don't jump ship. And so I think that that's a pretty simple, but are really a rough measure of success that we're be to maintain our funding to continue moving forward.” Without the support of major stakeholders, it would be impossible for the organization to work toward its main objectives. From an association perspective, a veteran agency practitioner said that, “if we were growing our numbers, growing membership, and we didn't lose much to attrition, I think we were doing our job.” Again, if the organization was able to return to its core purpose, that would reflect success.

**Managing risk.** Many participants understood intractable issues as part of risk management. Intractable scenarios could increase organizational risk, and practitioners often described their decision-making processes in the context of adding or reducing risk. While every organization must take on some risk, multiple practitioners pointed to getting involved in intractable issues as an “unnecessary risk” for organizations that should be avoided when possible. One practitioner with 20 years of experience explained that, for her,

I think you have to understand the risk, understand what's going to happen.

Don't act surprised when people are pissed off that you did a Colin

Kaepernick ad. Don't be surprised that people are mad at you because you were publicly announcing your bathroom policy. Just be prepared. Be prepared. Be prepared for the cost in activism—because there's cost, whether it's money or customers or reputation. There's cost and sometimes it's worth it.

This was perhaps the most explicit representation of a common sentiment, particularly on the part of agency professionals: Polarizing stances on intractable problems *cause* real and potential problems. In some cases, risks could be worthwhile, but not in all cases.

One way participants understood their success on a variety of intractable problems was as the need to minimize risk for their organizations. As a practitioner for a large hospital explained,

We came across and as a management team we often discussed, how do we respond or do we respond? Is it more risk for us? Do we get anything out of being responsive? Do we alienate audiences? So those were our very, very real discussions that we had.

This reflected the majority of practitioners' perspectives: Organizations involved in issues management were always taking some degree of risk. The further the issue veered away from the core focus and values of the organization, the more risk practitioners seemed to perceive from engagement. Practitioners described polarizing issues and stances that went against stakeholder perspectives as high risk. Conversely, a veteran agency practitioner described multiple examples of low-risk strategies—unsurprisingly, related to relatively mundane issues, including Patagonia's support for

the environment and SeaWorld's recent stand against plastics. Beyond these, she did not see value in the risk of engaging with more polarizing, intractable issues:

If you think 50% of your customers are with you, and 50% are against you, how can you take a position on a polarizing issue that's just going to cause further divisiveness as a business? It's not worth the risk. In my opinion.

Participants described many different ways to make such judgment calls, but a clear majority framed the decision in terms of risk and reward.

While, in most of these constructions, engaging in public discourse on intractable issues was perceived to be the more risky stance, several participants made the opposite point: Not taking a position could also prove risky. Those who shared this viewpoint included the regional president for a global agency, who noted that “standing for nothing is a risk in and of itself.” Particularly when organizations found themselves in a competitive environment, they could be perceived as (1) behind the times, or (2) complicit regarding important issues.

While in the past, a “no comment” or avoidance of certain issues was both more popular and seemingly safer for organizations under many circumstances, participants explained that the rules have changed:

It wasn't so long ago where every legal counsel could be expected to say when an issue like this cropped up. “Oh say nothing, just kind of, we'll take care of it.” And today, of course, public opinion, what with social media and everything else going on, requires communication professionals, whatever they may be called, hopefully they are called public relations people, but you know that they may be called any number of things to the corporate suite.

This participant pointed to climate change as a clear example of an area where many organizations can no longer stay silent: Where the risks of silence outweigh the risks of taking a position on the issue. As a former association practitioner noted,

One of the arguments that we had to make back then was, if you're not taking a position, you are taking a position. No position is still a position. If you weren't siding with us and were remaining neutral, you were not helping us.

Particularly on divisive political issues, participants explained that organizations often could not equate silence with neutrality.

Multiple practitioners spoke to the importance of deeply understanding stakeholder stances in order to evaluate and calculate risk. Referencing a major retailer that has taken several polarizing social stances, one participant explained that “They're making a calculated risk. A calculated risk is that the immediate fallout of a subset of people is either going to be medium or long term, not damaging than what they gain and attract through meeting other consumers in the marketplace of where they're at.” Such risks have been taken on both sides of the political spectrum. An in-house practitioner with experience in advocacy and corporate settings, stressed the importance of an organization “appealing to their marketplace.” He continued, “by and large, for example, like Hobby Lobby, many of their craft-going clientele are already more conservative. It's not like they're really changing or diverging much from their business model, they're just appealing to where their consumers are.” Another practitioner, an agency professional with government and contentious issues experience, shared that “Nike took a calculated risk and decided to stand for

something, knowing that it wouldn't suffer. The repercussions it would suffer wouldn't be significant enough to damage its business and its lifeblood.”

**Eye on the prize.** Many participants spoke to the importance of focusing on business or organizational goals in the midst of intractable scenarios. Not simply for for-profit corporations, competitive organizational and monetary measures of success (market share, sales, fundraising, membership, etc.) proved to be a significant driver of practitioner advice for clients/employers. Some practitioners saw clear overlap. Several posited that, during contentious situations, a corporation should still make revenue growth one of its core goals and a nonprofit should see fundraising growth as an end rather than just a means to more resources. When it came to taking stances on intractable issues, the vice president of public relations for a global insurance company explained that, “at the end of the day, we say, 'is this supporting the business? Hindering it? Does it put our reputation at risk?' And making sure we're doing the right things to support whatever the business needs are.” Measurement should reflect the full scope of the organization’s priorities, not simply track public relations or communication efforts.

In this context, some straight-forward interpretations of success regarding intractable circumstances included organizations engaging in political or public policy issue debates. Whether victory was in the form of 51% in a referendum, electing a majority in a state senate chamber, or changing the mind of one regulatory body, participants spoke to the importance of winning these finite battles. As one nonprofit and advocacy practitioner explained, “Ultimately, the success of what we were doing was whether or not it passed.” This perspective generally prioritized the

clear end goal over the path: “When you've got legislators who are vehemently opposed and then they go on and they vote for it, then they say it's because it's the right thing to do, but it's because it's constituent pressure. Either way, they did it. That for me was successful.” These understandings of success did not exclude ongoing intractability or define goals as reducing or eliminating it. By contrast, the “prize” in this case is often part of an ongoing intractable situation, which practitioners should keep in mind.

One participant taking this view described the short- and long-term implications on her work to support highway safety:

Short term, yes, did this vote pass? Did it get out of committee? Did you have influence on the final draft? That kind of thing. Once a bill is passed then you have to go through the regulatory process. We would also comment to the docket on regulatory issues, so we would have influence on the policy as it's being implemented. But to be honest, in that case, the ultimate measurement was death, was highway traffic fatalities.

This measurement framework described both short-term process goals and long-term outcome goals as crucial for understanding the full impact of the organization's advocacy efforts in a contentious situation. While the means of achieving and measuring each step could vary, the desired outcome was crystal clear.

By contrast, when organizational values do not necessitate engaging in such contentious issues, practitioners used the same focusing sentiment to recommend avoiding conflict. A veteran consultant in the southeast explained that, from her perspective,

Businesses exist to do business. I know that sounds like a simplistic capitalist view. But, if you take a stand on something and you lose all your customers, well, how is that? “Okay, great. What a success.” So, in my opinion, if you're taking a stand on something, I think you should probably... I think you're hedging your bets and I think you're hoping that your customers are going to appreciate and approve of your position.

This perspective clearly outlines the calculations organizations and practitioners face in making decisions in an environment of intractable problems. For this veteran practitioner, it is worth the effort to help organizations understand their customers and their values to help drive appropriate engagement, as well as appropriate disengagement and reflection. Later in the interview, she reiterated, “I don't think activism is bad. I just think it needs to be calculated activism.”

Black-and-white understandings of success stood in contrast to most organizational participation in intractable problems, where no arbiter could determine clear victory for an organization. In some cases this caused practitioners to fall back on more traditional measurement methods, such as content analysis. One veteran agency and public affairs practitioner in the Midwest referred to longitudinal analyses of media coverage a key issue in this context:

I probably would have my team go back to 2014 and ‘15 when it was a big thing and do a content analysis of the media relations around it... measure the content and how often [the issue] comes up and if there’s a dip. And if it stays low, lower than it was in 2014, then we’re obviously doing a good job.

In this case, the practitioner used media coverage and its agenda-setting value as an evaluation of her organization's efforts. Yet, she also explained that this was not an ideal approach, expressing openness to new methods and techniques for evaluation while managing intractable issues.

A veteran agency practitioner equated success in public relations regarding contentious issues to making a variety of other processes easier for organizations. He explained that,

The big one, especially from, say, a (real estate) developer's viewpoint, is how long is it going to take you to get you permit? How much money are you going to spend in legal fees? You can win in a court of law. But that's going to be very, very expensive.

In this way, understanding the broad implications of reputation and public perception on an organization's efforts allows for a clearer depiction of public relation's value in contentious circumstances. A business-to-business practitioner explained the challenges of this type of measurement in the context of very long sales cycles:

We can have somebody who is at the top of the sales funnel for years before we kind of get them in and hopefully, through public relations, we're nudging someone into that process. But it's so hard to be able to determine what we (PR) are contributing to that.

Such measurement requires a deeper and more holistic understanding of the context of communication, as well as the interaction of stakeholders with messages. He continued by emphasizing that



We're not counting clips, we're looking at, did it appear in the target media?  
And did we differentiate the organization successfully through that coverage?  
Or whatever that occasion might be. And did our strategic messages get  
across? And then we look at that comparison to how our competitors are  
doing in a similar vein.

Retention and competitive understandings of success resonated with other  
participants in intractable scenarios.

**Triple bottom line.** In its most optimistic light, public relations was perceived  
as a force to move organizations from a business-first mindset to one that helped  
organizations understand and prioritize their publics and communities. In some cases,  
this manifested as a clear alignment with communitarian organizational values or a  
public mission, but it also was reflected by corporate communicators who saw the  
potential for public relations as an agent of change within organizations. A veteran  
government and healthcare practitioner based in the northeast described, from her  
perspective, the value of public relations for society when practitioners help  
organizations better understand their communities:

Public relations is such a unique and beneficial practice. The world needs it  
desperately, because there's no shortage of people who are trying to take  
advantage, who are trying to lie, why who have their own agendas. And if we  
stay true to who we are, at the core, and the premise that, let's say in the  
[nonprofit advocacy organization for seniors] and all, local chapter that we  
really are—How do I put this? We really are for our organization, but also

have a responsibility to do what's right for the public that we essentially represent.

For nonprofit or governmental organizations, a community orientation may be more clearly associated with established public relations practices, but corporations (and corporate communicators) are finding new ways to embrace community values.

The former president of a global agency, who had worked with many petrochemical, energy, and consumer products companies, explained that public relations could provide additional, vital measures of organizational strength in intractable scenarios:

I mean, 'do no harm' still exists. But now we're looking at the reputation management aspect, the soft assets on the balance sheet, that comes with commitment to social issues and being helpful in terms of addressing them.

Employees are looking for that kind of commitment. Even shareholders. The entire area of socially responsible investment has grown tremendously.

In this way, multiple participants emphasized the role of public relations in moving organizations beyond a primarily financial mindset, toward a measurement infrastructure that incorporates and values reputation and other relevant external perspectives. He continued by pointing to B Corporations<sup>12</sup> as one way of more deeply integrating this perspective into a for-profit environment: “It's basically incorporating good corporate citizenship into your company's DNA. It certainly

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<sup>12</sup> B Corporations are a voluntary social sustainability certification that more than 2,600 companies worldwide are using. This framework involves an integration of social values into the corporate governance language, overcoming some of the traditional challenges for businesses taking interest in social issues (Gehman & Grimes, 2017).

includes customer service and advertising and things like that. But, it goes beyond that into environmental issues, HR, human rights issues.” From his perspective, the public relations function could be empowered under a B Corporation’s structure to support a broader conception of organizational values within society.

Practitioners did not have to point toward a new organizational or management structure to support making substantive changes, or to see the public relations function as an agent for improved measurement and refocusing on organizational goals. A rural hospital practitioner described his interactions with management as going both ways—each side helping the other to avoid getting bogged down in the minutiae of day-to-day work in order to refocus on the most important organizational priorities. He emphasized that promoting community health should be at the center of its mission—that a hospital’s value should be measured by its societal impact:

Well, there's this old saying some of my executives like to say, sometimes we worry about margins so much we forget about mission. In a way it's true and in a way it's a perverse illustration of the times we live in, that even a non-profit like our hospital has to worry about, what a bottom line is. So here's how I tend to look at it. I don't look at it consistently all the time. When we do said event, in which we are trying to promote a set of healthy behaviors. Just to throw something out there, let's say it's an event around the theme of heart health. What we want to do is have the message about heart health, what it means, why it's important.

For a hospital, community health metrics are not necessarily tracked by insurers, doctors, or communicators, but, as this participant argues, they are at the heart of the organization's mission. Particularly as a rural hospital in the midst of intractable issues beyond its control such as the opioid crisis or lack of access to care, the community role serves as another example of how public relations can serve to re-center organizations in ways that align with both the core mission and societal needs.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, Limitations, and Conclusion**

In the previous sections of this dissertation, I have examined the confluence of wicked or intractable problems, issues management, and the space in theory and praxis for agonistic, dissensus-informed engagement (and avoidance) as part of public relations. The results from 41 interviews, described in the prior chapter, reflect a broad cross-section of practitioners with different industry backgrounds, skill specializations, geographies, and ideologies. While not intended to be representative of an “average” practitioner (if it is even possible for one to exist), the approach was designed to reflect a diverse and robust sample of practitioners willing to ruminate on the nature of their practice and its impact on organizations, societies, and the profession. When asked about intractable problems, participants contributed a wide variety of expected and unexpected examples. They shared their understandings of contention and intractability in these contexts, their approaches and best practices to managing such situations, and their perspectives on relevant measurement and evaluation. Reflecting on these responses augments existing public relations scholarship regarding social issues management (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Dodd, 2018), social change (e.g., Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018; Ganesh & Zoller, 2012), non-consensus perspectives on engagement (e.g., Davidson, 2016; Davidson & Motion, 2018; Gower, 2006), and measurement (e.g., Macnamara, 2014, 2015, 2018a; Watson & Zerfass, 2011; Zerfass, 2008).

Public relations scholarship has generated normative, consensus-based models of practice as well as mixed motives models that strive for “balancing of communality with conflict” (Murphy, 1991, p. 125). Examining the ways in which

practitioners engage with intractable problems pulls back the curtain even further to reveal: (1) distinctions between practitioner words and actions with regard to relationships and consensus, (2) complex patterns of engagement and disengagement for potentially perilous intractable issues and (3) an enduring belief in the value of excellent public relations work.

Participants described a host of intractable, wicked problems (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Rittel & Weber, 1973; Willis, 2016) whose management they perceived as part of their role as public relations practitioners. When faced with such challenges, some followed or recommended paths of relationship building (e.g., Broom, Casey, & Richey, 1997; Ferguson, 2018; Grunig, 2011), deliberative engagement (Willis, Tench & Devins, 2018), and dialogue (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Lane, 2014; Madden, 2018), while others utilized tactics less driven by consensus building, such as agonism (e.g., Davidson, 2016; Mouffe, 1999; Roberts-Miller, 2002; Zaharna, 2016) and understood them from perspectives akin to dissensus (e.g., Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Rancière, 2010; Madden et al., 2018). Practitioners juggled a variety of values, with the majority supporting organizational perspectives and situating or justifying contentious issue engagement and disengagement within this context. A significant minority prioritized community or societal values above the organization's values in making engagement decisions.

These findings add to research on intractable issues on several fronts. First, by identifying the facets through which practitioners understand and categorize such problems. Second, by adding to the understanding of participant perspectives and challenges in practice (Place, 2019b). Third, by explicating and categorizing the

tactics and best practices through which practitioners enact the process of social issues management (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Fourth, through adding additional examples of agonistic tactics (Davidson, 2016; Davidson & Motion, 2018; Ganesh & Zoller, 2012) and dissensual perspectives in practice (Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). In doing so, it expands a contingency theory perspective (See Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010), to include a consensus/dissensus continuum, as well as engagement/disengagement. Finally, sixth, through presenting a holistic conception of organizational listening, measurement, and evaluation in such contexts (Macnamara, 2014, 2015, 2018a; Place, 2019a).

Investigating intractable problems, with an appreciation for the complexity of issues and diversity of potential approaches, reflects the strategic nature of public relations for organizations. In this context, the professional work of public relations is never divorced from the organization's interests and values. Practitioners have the opportunity and obligation to counsel organizations on how to best reflect their mission and values within society (Heath, 2006; Heath & McComas, 2015; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Taylor, 2010, 2018). Participants also underscored the flexibility and creativity needed to help organizations come to such decisions in continuously changing environments.

With growing expectations for organizations to take public stances on contentious issues (Dodd, 2018), the role of the organization in public discourse has expanded (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Public relations has the potential to make constructive contributions to civil society and build social capital (Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor, 2010). That potential has been both amplified

by technological change as well as reconstituted at the global level (Castells, 2008), making issues more complex and potentially more contentious. While some organizations continue to fight these evolving expectations through isolation, others have embraced the discursive contributions they can make to solving societal issues through engagement (Heath, 2001; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Willis, Tench, & Devins, 2018).

The following sections will summarize and contextualize the findings from the results section and offer theoretical and practical implications. Understanding the full scope of managing intractability for practitioners requires an inclusive definition of public relations, allowing for space beyond mutuality and relationship-strengthening as end goals (Edwards, 2011). Participants supported this definition in their actions—if not always in their descriptions of their personal or professional values. As public relations is relatively immature as a theory-driven field of research (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2011), this chapter will also develop positive theories (J. Grunig, 2006) to support research *on public relations* and *for public relations* to provide insights for both scholars and practitioners (J. Grunig, 2008). The chapter will continue with reflections on future research directions, limitations, and a conclusion.

### **Discussion: Intractability's Mark on Theory and Praxis**

The following discussion is organized around metathemes, synthesizing the concepts from the results section. These include the *extent of intractability*, the *inevitability of conflict and contention*, *value-driven decisions*, *flexibility for complexity*, and *ad hoc understandings of effectiveness*. Each of these metathemes



attempts to pull together core concepts from the results section to speak to larger understandings of practitioner experiences, understandings, and implications.

**Intractability's guises and sizes.** Intractability appeared in many forms. From seemingly small or mundane problems (including parking lot disputes and otherwise amicable mergers), to major societal issues (including contentious labor disputes, and community-wide economic issues), examples of intractability defied prediction and expectation. The initial size of a problem did not dictate its potential impact on organizations and stakeholders. Participants provided examples of intractable problems and explained them with characteristics which can be mapped along four continua—solvable to fully intractable, natural to situational, internal to external, and personal to organizational. These examples provided insights into how practitioners conceptualize such challenges as well as how they connect the problems with potential solutions.

First, practitioners selected examples demonstrating differing degrees of intractability. Some were fully intractable and unsolvable, while others began as seemingly impossible challenges, but found some degree of resolution. Problems did not need to be wholly unsolvable to reflect many of the elements of wicked problems (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Practitioners brought up many problems that have been, at least temporarily, solved or resolved. These included the highway safety advocate who helped build a diverse, if temporary, coalition to support legislative goals. It also reflected the unexpected tensions, but eventual beneficial outcomes of the mergers brought up by participants. While they may have

seemed intractable to the participants during the process, they did have some degree of solution or resolution.

The second facet identified the degree to which intractable issues are inherent to the organization or industry, such as the structural challenges in public education, the public sentiment against the pharmaceutical or tobacco industries, or the built-in contentiousness of politically engaged trade associations. Practitioners described such scenarios as expected and were able to prepare for them, despite inherent uncertainty (Pang, Cropp, & Cameron, 2006). By contrast, situational intractability reflected a variety of less expected occurrences: internal or external radical activist efforts (Derville, 2005), shifting consumer expectations of corporations (Dodd, 2018; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007), heightened perceptions of organizational responsibility to communities (Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018; Matten & Crane, 2005). These represented issues where the organization was unprepared to respond or unsure of how to engage, such as the financial institution contacted by gay-rights activists.

In this example, among others, practitioners did not describe their work within the context of coorientation, or alignment with publics (Avery, Lariscy, & Sweetser, 2010; Broom, 1977; Park, 2003; Seltzer, 2007; A. T. Verčič & Colić, 2016), but in terms of managing the issue at hand. They weighed potential options based on the risk to the organization as well as organizational values, choosing the option that best met those criteria. Participants presented a stark distinction between their understanding and meaning making of expected, naturally intractable scenarios and those that were situational—timely, unexpected, and often more specific to the event or issue at hand. Faced with situational intractability, practitioners did not understand

their success as tied to the approval or consensus specific publics, but related to the broader legitimacy of their organization.

The third facet described practitioner views on the locus of intractability. Issues fell across the entire spectrum, from external activists group engagement (e.g., Aldoory & Sha, 2007; Ciszek, 2016; Grunig, 1992; Kim & Cameron, 2016; Stokes & Rubin, 2010) to labor negotiations (Plowman, 2015). The labor dispute within a global corporation exemplified the complexities of internal intractability, while a school district could face intractable issues both externally (from community members, lawmakers, and government agencies) as well as internally (such as students, disaffected staff members, inept leaders, and disappointed parents). Seemingly small or internal issues often sparked intractability for organizations, including mergers and employee activism (McCown, 2007) or activism from key stakeholders (Uysal & Tsetsura, 2015). Intractable organizations or industries, a case where the entire nature of the organization and its work is under constant challenge, reflected an embrace of an issues management mindset (e.g., Chase, 1982, 1984; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Heath & Cousino, 1990; Heath & Palenchar, 2009), where each decision is calculated based on the potential for creating or exacerbating external threats and measured by the degree to which the organization is able to act freely in its own interests. Intractable industries and organizations also needed to understand the necessity of non-consensus outcomes (e.g., Bigam Stahley & Boyd, 2006; Ciszek, 2016; Gilpin & Murphy, 2010b; Holtzhausen, 2000, 2002; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015; Murphy, 1991), as participants described existing in a largely intractable environment.

The fourth facet explores the degree to which participants felt personally invested in the issues at hand. Responses ranged from those who were solely fulfilling their professional obligations to those with deep emotional investments in their work. Practitioners understood public relations relative to professional narratives (Fisher, 1984, 1987; Pressgrove et al., 2019), often positioning themselves as heroines in the intractable issues they faced. They also saw their actions in the midst of intractable problems as being highly complex and unclear (Murphy, 2000), often with uncontrollable outcomes (Murphy, 2010) and ethical obligations (Holtzhausen, 2015; Jin, Pang, & Smith, 2018; Kennedy, Xu, & Sommerfeldt, 2016; Pearson, 1989; Place, 2019b). Negotiation occasionally emerged as a solution, with practitioners seeing themselves in the position of intermediary between or among disaffected groups (Brooks, Wakefield, & Plowman, 2018; Plowman, 2005). The university managing a white supremacist speaker exemplified the need for participants to balance their personal values (in this case, revulsion), the need for safety for students, faculty, staff, and community members, and the institutional values of free speech and expression.

Together, these facets provide a heuristic for making sense of the complexity of intractable problems in scholarship and praxis. They do so through integrating a diverse group of concepts—including wicked problems (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Rittel & Webber, 1973), CSA and CSR (Dodd, 2018; Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018), internal and external activism (Aldoory & Sha, 2007; McCown, 2007; Stokes & Rubin, 2010), and practitioners' professional identities (Place, 2019b). Some of these have not gained significant traction within public relations scholarship or have not been translated into actionable language for practitioners. This approach lays the

groundwork to connect intractability to postmodern theories of public relations, such as dissensus and agonism, and with practice (e.g., Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015; Holtzhausen, 2000, 2002; Toth, 2002). In doing so, it prioritizes dissent and disagreement (Motion, Leitch & Weaver, 2015), understanding a dissensus perspective as a reasonable lens through which one can make meaning of complexity (Lyotard, 1984).

**Inevitability of conflict and contention.** Intractability is inevitable as multiple, competing narratives and perspectives will always exist (Lyotard, 1984) and organizations will continue to battle for scarce resources in their environments (Sethi, 1977). Participants from many different types of organizations reiterated that conflict was both inevitable and a central part of their public relations practice, and that not everyone will agree with organizational viewpoints. They shared that practitioners can (and should) prepare for the complexity and unpredictability of such scenarios (Gilpin & Murphy, 2006, 2008, 2010a). Participants described a variety of examples of interaction with highly contentious publics, internal and external, spanning industries, decades, and defying categorization as organizational or reputational crises (Coombs, 2007; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Intractable issues or situations may be or become crises, but may also act as ongoing but less urgent threats to organizations. Managing intractability and working within the perspective of dissensus has always been a part of public relations practice, but it has not moved from the edges of public relations scholarship (Ciszek, 2016). Utilizing a definition of public relations that creates space for non-consensus approaches, both in scholarship and practice,

provides a place for a thorough examination and understanding of such diverse approaches (Edwards, 2016).

While not explicitly using terms such as *dissensus* and *agonism*, practitioner responses reflected these postmodern concepts. A dissensus perspective allows space for dissent (Rancière, 1998, 2010), as exemplified in practice by the example of gay-rights protesters allowed by public relations staff to be visible at a major sporting event. Practitioners demonstrated an understanding of the organization's place within broader societal discourses and deliberations (Dryzek, 2009; Edwards, 2016; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Willis, Tench, & Devins, 2018), whether at the local, national, or global level (Castells, 2008; Sommerfeldt, 2013b). This was further demonstrated by practitioners' discussions of communicating with potentially oppositional publics—such as the participant working on senior health care issues for a statewide quasi-governmental organization in the Northeast. She faced the challenge of communicating the value and importance of publicly available services to seniors in need, but often ideologically opposed to taking advantage of them. Practically, she needed to inform, but knew the truly changing minds on fundamental political issues was highly improbable. She understood her work, her organization's mission, and the value they provided to her communities in terms of communicating complex, polarizing information to those who would often disagree. For her, there was no way to succeed without accepting this dissent. Allowing such tensions to exist serves as a potentially robust civic function of public relations (Davidson & Motion, 2018).

Practitioners provided insights into the positive and negative outcomes of agonistic engagement and tactics. As Dodd (2018) and Gaither et al. (2018) have

described, practitioners understood organizational *brandstanding* (taking a stance on a divisive issue) as an increasingly expected action, rather than strictly in the term's original meaning as a promotional tactic (Pratt et al., 2011). Multiple participants agreed that the publicity from such stances could have a positive impact on organizational bottom lines, reinforcing the findings of CSA research that has demonstrated increased consumer purchasing intention for corporations taking stances, particularly when they agree with that stance (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). The findings add to CSA research by explaining additional, nonfinancial rationales for social advocacy, including values advocacy (based on personal values, professional values, organizational values, publics' values, or some combination).

***Engagement and contingency.*** At the organizational level, contingency theory factors (particularly internal characteristics of the organization such as open vs. closed culture, organizational hierarchy, and corporate culture)<sup>13</sup> played a role in understanding how practitioners decided when (and when not) to engage in potentially contentious discourse (Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). At the individual level, characteristics such as personal ethics, comfort level with conflict, predisposition toward altruism, and familiarity with external publics were demonstrated (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). In industries or organizations that were more intrinsically intractable, practitioners were more likely to endorse engagement and advocacy. These findings support contingency theory's assertions that practitioners adapt their stance or recommendation of practice to suit the issues and scenario at hand (Cancel,

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<sup>13</sup> See Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010, pp. 544-546

Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999). Participants also agreed with contingency theory that symmetrical approaches have reasonable limits when “morally repugnant” publics are involved (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010, p. 531). Extending contingency theory’s findings on the major thematic drivers of an organization’s willingness to be accommodative (see Reber & Cameron, 2003), internal publics and organizational values also played a crucial role in pushing organizations to engage on external issues. In both cases, participant responses captured the need for an organization to appear authentic to its own values and priorities as well as in line with societal expectations of evolution and responsiveness.

**Value-driven decisions.** When making decisions, counseling clients, or adding their perspective to management discourse, practitioners balanced organizational values and professional values. The inclusion of values, which in contingency theory are only incorporated as they reflect the values of the dominant coalition (see Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010, pp. 545), were explained by practitioners as a crucial part of the decision-making process for how and when to engage in discourse on intractable problems. The majority of participants explained their role as interpreting or applying the organization’s values for the situation at hand to guide the management of intractability, similar to a *values advocacy* understanding (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994; Bigam Stahley & Boyd, 2006). Only a few participants clearly articulated a pro-social role for organizations and the public relations function in the sense that they would help to combat discursive inequities and promote subaltern publics and counter publics (Dutta & Pal, 2010; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). Several practitioners articulated the particular importance of cross-cultural knowledge and



counsel as part of this responsibility, reflecting the centrality of culture in global public relations scholarship (Sriramesh, 2009; Sriramesh & D. Verčič, 2007).

While participants spoke to the importance of their personal and professional values, their perspectives echoed research that points toward an over-estimation of individual professionalism and an under-estimation of others in the field (Sallot, Cameron, & Lariscy, 1998). For participants, this meant that they believed in their own ethical fortitude, but were more skeptical of the abilities of other practitioners to maintain the same standards. Participants acknowledged their significant professional responsibility to the public sphere, including ensuring information accuracy in all communication. Responses reflected an understanding that public relations efforts take place within spheres of discourse driven by broadly rational, meritocratic forces (Habermas, 1991) and that practitioners' work can make significant positive contributions to the useful function of such spheres and their communities (Edwards, 2016; Kruckeberg, Stark & Vujnovic, 2006; Self, 2010).

Also crucial were practitioners wrestling with discrepancies between their individual professional values and organizational values as part of decision making. In some examples, such as the public library practitioner managing the issue of drag queen story time, the values between the organization and the practitioner align. In others, such as the protests over gay rights at a major sporting event, the values of the organization and the practitioner diverge. These perspectives point to a need for a much more complete understanding of organizational values and practitioner values, as well as their interplay, to further augment contingency theory and understand the role of public relations in navigating engagement during contentious situations and

intractable problems. Previous scholarship on values advocacy emphasizes the enactment of organizational values through public relations (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994; Bigam Stahley & Boyd, 2006), but this project adds to the understandings of the complex interplay among different levels of values in practitioner and organizational decision-making processes.

*Postmodernism and acknowledging “little narratives.”* Acknowledgement of contested issues and acceptance of different stances was portrayed as a crucial theme in participant understanding of dissent and disagreement. Many practitioners emphasized the importance of letting stakeholders know that they were being heard—in a sense, acknowledging the “little narrative” or local understanding of a situation (Lyotard, p. 60). In this way, they supported the dissensus-relevant goals of accepting disagreement, rather than enforcing consensus (Edwards, 2018). While not necessarily an advocacy tactic in the sense of contingency theory (e.g., Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010; Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999), acknowledgement supports a civic understanding of public relations as part of ongoing engagement (Taylor, 2018). Such approaches made space for multiple points of view and multiple values in the same discourse.

Several participants also described dissensus and agonism as, potentially, leading toward consensus. Distinct from an approach that embraces dissonance and agonism as inevitable, this perspective underscores the need for those tactics as tools to work toward mutually agreeable outcomes. Coming from negotiation theories and mixed motives models, these perspectives focus on compromise and finding the best-possible solution given the circumstances (e.g., Plowman, 2005; Murphy, 1991).

Often, this involves blending advocacy and negotiation (Brooks, Wakefield, & Plowman, 2018; Plowman, 2005, 2007), and can be particularly relevant in public affairs settings (Plowman, 2017). Such a perspective mirrors coorientation theory approaches that prioritize accurate understandings of publics' issue perceptions in order to work toward consensus (e.g., Broom & Dozier, 1990; Cancel et al., 1997; Seltzer, 2007). Yet, both negotiation and coorientation theory emphasize consensus as the measure of success—the nearer opposed entities are to an acceptable solution for all, the better the outcome. Many participants, by contrast, spoke to the need to act in spite of certain publics, or to communicate in a way that actively antagonized other entities, such as in the legislative battles for consumer financial protections (regarding payday lending regulations) and public health efforts to increase vaccinations. Success in these situations meant calculating the degree of consensus needed to achieve a desired end and actively, publicly accepting that some publics would maintain their own perspectives and narratives.

**Flexibility for complexity.** Flexibility was seen as a virtue by practitioners, both in the sense of agility and adaptability to changing circumstances (van Ruler, 2014, 2015) and in the sense of cross-cultural or extra-organizational translation needed to manage complexity (Capizzo, 2018). As Reber and Cameron (2003) investigated, practitioners and organizations have limits to the degree they will accommodate external actors. Being able to provide counsel to organizations, manage expectations, and make informed choices about when (and when not) to engage is crucial for organizational success. Practitioners must understand the circumstances at hand in order to make informed decisions. In intractable scenarios, they should

reevaluate the balance between pursuing established goals and objectives and the need to recognize emergent possibilities (Winkler & Etter, 2018). Then, they must have the translational skills to communicate decisions and justifications both inside and outside of the organization. The ability to manage such boundary-spanning discourse is an important professional practice in its own right (Pieczka, 2011).

While it is certainly within their purview to respond to accusations, fact-check external groups, and seek out complete factual responses for organizations, practitioners demonstrated their discomfort with complexity and agonism in themes such as transparency and objectivity, which represented standardized professional values (Sallot, Cameron, & Lariscy, 1998). They preferred a journalistic or media relations-centered black-and-white approach to objectivity. The understanding of dialogue and collaboration exemplified in these answers reflects organizations asking publics to align with them as a precondition for conversation, rather than working to understand and acknowledge the differences in perspective. Thus, the professional values were not always reflective of practitioner-recommended best practices (Holtzhausen, 2015).

**Ad hoc understandings of effectiveness.** Participant insights related to questions of measurement, effectiveness, and evaluation reflected a wide variety of layered approaches. They demonstrated that, like communication tactics, evaluation should be crafted from multiple elements to fit the situation. Rather than using a singular approach, perspective, or tool, participants described piecing together understandings of effectiveness from among a variety of sources, as well as tailoring these understandings to the situation at hand. Practitioners described *traditional*

*metrics, returning to normal, managing risk, eye on the prize, and triple bottom line* understandings, reflecting different priorities in distinct intractable scenarios.

Through these approaches, they demonstrated a willingness to incorporate and integrate multiple measurement perspectives into contentious issue management, including campaign effectiveness, community-centric understandings, risk management, and organizational freedom. Fewer mentioned social science-driven practices, such as measuring relationships (J. Grunig, 2008; Hon & J. Grunig, 1999) or measuring beyond organizational perspectives, such as societal implications, unintended consequences, or agonistic metrics (Davidson & Motion, 2018).

*Traditional metrics* reflect time-honored campaign- or output-centric measurements as well as changes of awareness, opinion, or behavior (Dozier & Ehling, 1992; Likely & Watson, 2013). This approach is most reflective of a narrow management-by-objectives mentality (Greenwood, 1981) that prioritizes a focus on executing tactics that should contribute to the overall success of the organization, as understood and prescribed by management. Reflecting PRSA values, the majority of practitioners supported Stacks' (2010) understanding of research as happening before, during, and after a campaign. Many participants also expressed the importance of the counselor role: Public relations should have a seat at the management table to improve strategic decision making by organizational leaders and help define what the best communicative approaches should be (e.g., J. Grunig, 2006; J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozer, 2006; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozer, 2002).

Beyond measuring communication outputs and outcomes, a number of practitioners underlined the importance of maintaining focus on an organization's

most important goals and values, particularly when managing intractable scenarios. This *eye on the prize* focus—a prioritization of organizational goals over public relations or communicative metrics in times of intractability—melds the understanding of public relations’ contributions to management (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozer, 2002), professional obligations to the organization (Sallot, Cameron, & Lariscy, 1998). That said, it also reflects an idea of public relations evaluation based in gut feelings, in contrast to more data-driven approaches, reflecting in some cases a “lack of knowledge” of how to evaluate some of the most crucial elements of outreach, brand value, and public sentiment (Macnamara, 2015, p. 375).

Many practitioners described intractability, like crises, as a temporary state they tried to avoid or minimize. *Returning to normal* then emerged as a crucial evaluation concept. In this way, participants measured success as the degree to which they and their colleagues were able to go about their normal work, and that the organization was free of barriers or limitations based on the issue. Similarly, *managing risk* served as another common evaluative worldview for participants. Practitioners sought to help organizations minimize risk and understood that internal contention as well as external environments could serve as potential drivers of risks (Heath & McComas, 2015). And, while crisis planning was brought up several times as an important step, just as relevant was the understanding that intractable scenarios could easily become chaotic, uncontrollable events (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ullmer, 2002). Several participants mentioned reputation as a driving response factor (Coombs, 2007), but the majority of participants focused on intractable situations as broader events

requiring a more community-centered management approach (Liu & Fraustino, 2014). Concepts of *risk aversion* and *normalcy* pointed practitioners toward what they saw as preferential outcomes.

Several practitioners remarked on the degree to which organizations should see and understand the impact they have on communities and societies (Leitch & Motion, 2001, 2010; Kruckeberg, Stark, & Vujnovic, 2006). Reflecting a broader understanding of success (for a community or society rather than just the organization), multiple participants reinforced that measurement should look beyond organizational objectives to embrace community-based outcomes and even, potentially, social change (e.g., Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018). While not mentioned explicitly, ideas of balanced scorecards (Zerfass, 2008) would help to codify and measure such impacts. To be clear, this was a separate theme from organizations that operated with goals, values, and objectives involving societal ends. For example, a driving safety organization would include public policy changes to reduce fatalities as a core goal. By contrast, the organizations and practitioners mentioned above were referring to outcomes not central to the function of the organization.

These metathemes point toward intractability as a widely apparent phenomenon to practitioners, one that puts conflict at the center of many facets of public relations practice. Managing intractability generates a unique set of best practices and decision-making challenges, which also have the potential to inform theory. Such situations emphasize the centrality of organizational values as well as flexibility rather than rigid planning. This translates not only to engagement or

management processes, but to understandings of measurement and evaluation that prioritize fluidity and responsiveness over standardization.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The major theoretical contributions from this dissertation include the *facets of intractability*; *realistic agonism and dissensus*; a new *SIM engagement framework*; *best practices for managing intractability*; *implications for dialogue, listening, and professionalism*; *dissensus as ethical practice*, and *holistic measurement*. These provide an overview of the contributions to issues management, the further inclusion of agonism- and dissensus-driven approaches, and the development of new ways of envisioning engagement and measurement for intractable issues: a social issues management (SIM) engagement framework and a holistic measurement approach.

**Facets of intractability.** The explication of four continua representing facets of intractable problems provides a praxis-centered framework for further analysis and development. One of the challenges of social issues management is understanding the reasons for intractability: Wicked problems are by nature difficult to identify and define (Rittel & Weber, 1973). In this way, developing facets of intractability allows for further investigation into the nature and implications of such scenarios. Issues management theories utilize process-centered approaches such as the *catalytic* or *issue catalyst model* (Cralle & Vibbert, 1983, 1985) or *social issues management model* (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) to understand the strategies, tactics, and responsibilities of organizations. By contrast, the facets provide an avenue to understand the underlying issues generating intractability, at any point in the process.



They are not meant to replace the important work done to understand the processes of issues management, but can supplement it with additional nuance.

**Fig. 5.1: Facets of Intractable Problems**

<i>Feature</i>			
<b>Degree of intractability:</b>	Solvable	←→	Fully intractable
<b>Issue type:</b>	Natural	←→	Situational
<b>Issue locus:</b>	Internal	←→	External
<b>Identity involvement:</b>	Personal	←→	Organizational

*Four facets of intractable problems.* The figure begins with the degree of intractability, as some problems comprise many elements of wicked problems such as being highly complex, ambiguous, unique, and detrimental to their communities (Rittel & Webber, 1973). As expressed by participants, many situations showed some elements of intractability, but not others. Practitioners noted that problems did not need to be wholly irresolvable to cause relevant frustration and benefit from a similar outlook and management perspective. That said, the degree of intractability did influence the specific tactical approaches selected by practitioners.

Second, some intractable problems were natural or expected given the industry or organizational history, while others were more circumstantial and unexpected—based in a specific situation. The former reflects highly contentious or polarized industries, such as tobacco, defined by Stokes and Rubin (2010) as beyond the realm of symmetry for interactions between organizations and defiant publics, such as militant activists (Derville, 2005). Some organizations understood that others might find their positions morally repugnant (Cancel et al., 1997; Pang, Jin, &

Cameron, 2010) and anticipated contention. Many other organizations found themselves thrust into intractable situations by external political factors, shifts in societal norms, or increasing expectations for community and civic involvement (Scherer et al., 2016).

The third facet examines whether the issue is centered inside the organization (as in a labor issue or merger scenario) or outside (such as activist pressure or regulatory challenges). Participants presented myriad examples of external issues (shifting social norms, environmental concerns, external activist publics, etc.), as well as multiple examples of internally intractable problems, such as the structural issues faced by the school district in a major city, as well as internal activism pointed toward external issues. While prior research has investigated public relations practitioners as activists (e.g., Holtzhausen, 2012, 2015; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002), shareholder activism (e.g., Ragas, 2013; Uysal, 2014; Uysal & Tsetsura, 2015; Yang, Uysal & Taylor, 2018), and the challenges of managing internal relationships (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Shen, 2011; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011), less attention has been paid to internal activism on contentious or intractable issues (McCown, 2007). Social issues management (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) addresses the role of internal or employee stakeholders as part of its evolution from a catalytic model (Crable & Vibbert, 1985). It does not explicitly address the potential for issues to arise based on employee disagreements with management, such as those based on internal activism, which would be a potentially valuable addition provided by this approach.

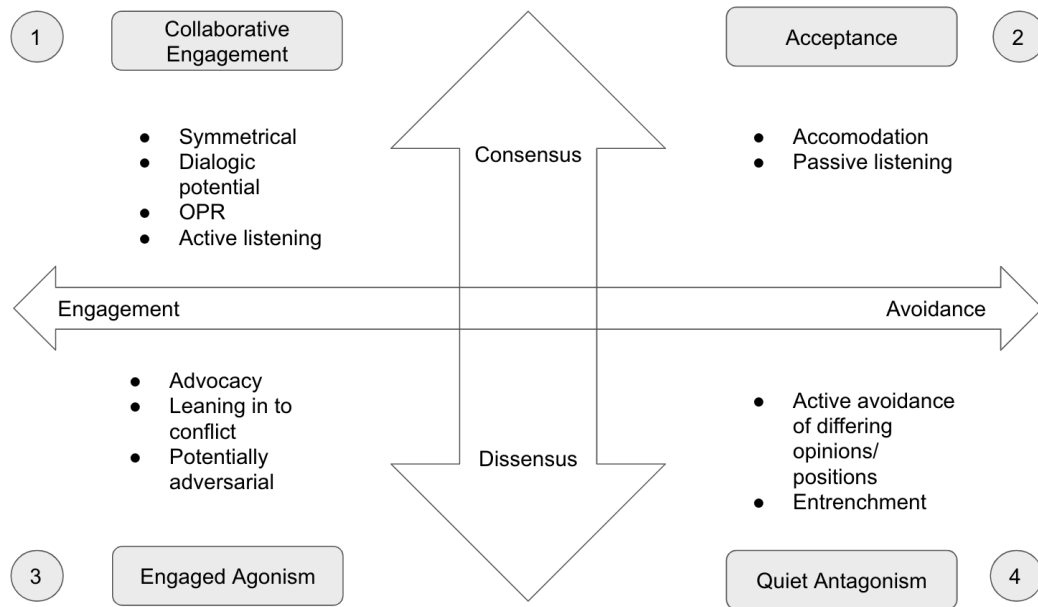
Finally, identity involvement was a core part of practitioner meaning making regarding the management of intractable problems. Some issues were perceived by

practitioners as relating solely to organizational values, some were seen primarily through the lens of their personal values, and others were a mix of both, either in alignment or disagreement. Following Place (2019b), practitioners applied personal and professional values to their recommendations and decision making, which could be challenging when organizations reflected values in opposition to their personal beliefs or professional norms.

**Realistic agonism and dissensus.** Dissensual and agonistic approaches represented the perspectives and tactics understood by practitioners as within the process of managing intractable problems. At minimum, participants supported the continued inclusion and examination of frameworks that push public relations beyond normative conceptions of consensus and symmetry (e.g., Leichty, 1997; Holtzhausen, Peterson, & Tindall, 2003; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010; Stoker & Tusinski, 2006). Relationship management approaches focus on one-to-one relationships or organization-public relationships (e.g., Ledingham, 2006; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) rather than understanding, as practitioners explained, the broader context for interaction and meaning making among (rather than between) actors in contentious or intractable circumstances (Bakhtin, 1981; Capizzo, 2018; Heath, 2013). Postmodern theories provide a window into understanding engagement outside of, for example, Buber-derived dialogic standards (Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). A broader definition of dialogue, as was demonstrated by participants, emphasizes listening (Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b; Place, 2019a), collaboration and problem solving (Anderson, 2003; Bohm, 2006; Gadamer, 1980; Lane, 2014), if not improving power equality, risk taking, and propinquity (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). In these

ways, practitioners acknowledged and accepted dissent and dissonance around contentious issues.

**Fig. 5.2: SIM Engagement Framework**



**SIM engagement framework.** Practitioners' tactical best practice recommendations could be traced along two main variables, dividing them into four quadrants. First, practitioners described the degree of engagement (or avoidance) for a given issue. Second, they selected whether to engage in a manner that promoted consensus or dissensus. Several practitioners described the process of making such decisions, based on whether there was a possibility of productive discussion through engagement or value in contributing to certain public conversations. While contingency theory uses only one continuum (accommodation to advocacy) to measure issue response (e.g., Cancel et al., 1997; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010; Reber & Cameron, 2003), practitioners in this study identified both the degree of engagement (engagement to avoidance) as well as the purpose of that engagement

(consensus to dissensus) as crucial factors (Madden et al., 2018). Participants made decisions about how to manage intractability based on three factors: (1) risk vs. reward for the organization, (2) the degree to which the action would be supportive of the organization's values, and (3) the power help by that organization within its environment. These factors pointed practitioners to the best course of action when situations arose, helping them to select, in essence, the right quadrant for their engagement.

***Zones of engagement.*** This created four zones of engagement or ways in which the organization could choose to manage the intractable issue at hand. Participants shared a wide variety of tactical approaches, emphasizing flexibility and customization—the need to match a strategic approach with the circumstances at hand (e.g., Kim & Cameron, 2016; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010; Reber & Cameron, 2003). Participants supported key decision-making factors such as external threats, external public characteristics, organizational characteristics, public relations department characteristics, and dominant coalition characteristics (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010, pp. 537-538) as well as the importance of both organizational values (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994; Bigam Stahley & Boyd, 2006) and professional values (J. Grunig, 2000; Heath, 2000; Holtzhausen, 2015). Themes demonstrated several approaches, reflecting degrees of engagement/disengagement as well as differing goals of consensus/dissensus.

The first approach, *collaborative engagement* reflects many existing normative theories and concepts in public relations, including management theories such as dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002), OPR (Ledingham, 2006), and

symmetry (J. Grunig, 2001) as well as community-centered crisis theories such as discourse of renewal (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Examples from practitioners included a housing nonprofit that worked with a variety of public and private stakeholders to improve housing opportunities and accessibility in an economically challenged Midwestern state. Another described a B2B insurance company that put its efforts into building very strong relationships with its major clients, including constant conversation about the preparation for and impact of global challenges such as climate change. Such exemplars are aimed at finding consensus in seemingly intractable scenarios through compromise and thorough understanding of the issues and publics at hand.

Dialogic theory, for example, reflects this understanding of engagement—almost to its logical extreme—by prioritizing shared understanding (Rogers, 1957), reducing power differentials (Buber, 1958), and embracing empathy, risk, and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Dialogic scholars understand this prioritization of the other as a basis for ethical understandings of engagement (Pearson, 1989; Toledano, 2018). OPR approaches, whether one-to-one or among organizations and publics (Heath, 2013), similarly strongly prioritize relationship strength with key stakeholders or publics as the primary measure of success (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2006; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Two-way symmetrical practices, as a normative ideal, prioritize finding consensus (J. Grunig, 2001). Societally focused theories such as political CSR (Rasche, 2015; Scherer, 2018; Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo, & Spicer, 2016) and FFST (Heath, 2006) emphasize finding and maintaining alignment of organizational values and goals with societal values and goals. In all of

these cases, the primary goal is consensus rather than advocating the organization's position. Understandings of issues management that emphasize alignment over advocacy also fit within this theme (Lauzen, 1997), although they provide a higher prioritization of organizational freedom and legitimacy than consensus, moving them both lower and to the right in the framework (although still in the upper left quadrant).

The second quadrant (upper right), *acceptance*, was most clearly articulated in organizational listening approaches and reflective community-centered practices, as well as some uses of contingency theory. Participant examples demonstrating this approach included the university-based think tank that promoted its researchers, but did not necessarily endorse their perspectives as well as the credit union counseled to stay out of a contentious local gay rights debate despite their internal support for the issue. While the findings are not exclusive to this tool, scholarship on listening provides the clearest description of such approaches, emphasizing the importance of valuing external perspectives (Macnamara, 2016a; Rancière, 1998) and prioritizing external language and understandings (Place, 2019a). Additionally, the *accommodation* end of the contingency theory spectrum could be understood as reflective of this tactic (e.g., Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). Taken to its logical extreme, this could mean the avoidance of any persuasive approaches (Foss & Griffin, 1995).

*Engaged agonism*, a third approach (lower left quadrant) familiar to political communicators and issues management scholars, encompasses actions not necessarily designed to attain consensus, but reflective of engagement and advocacy. This

approach was exemplified by practitioners and organizations practicing activism as part of nonprofits, issues management with corporations, as well as reputation-centered crisis response strategies (Bentley, 2015; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Adversarial and contentious communication was considered normal within activist settings (e.g., Brooks, Wakefield, & Plowman, 2018; Ciszek, 2018; Stokes & Rubin, 2010; Taylor, Vasquez, & Doorley, 2003) as well as governmental, political, or public diplomacy contexts (Waymer, 2009; Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Zaharna & Uysal, 2016). While not yet considered standard practice within corporate public relations, participants acknowledged the growth of corporations engaging in contentious issue discourse (e.g., Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Dodd, 2018; Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018; Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). Their perspectives supported evidence that taking stands on intractable social issues can be profitable for corporations (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015), but also acknowledged the difficulties of navigating contentious cultural issues (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) and balancing societal and organizational needs (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Jaques, 2008; Sethi, 1977). Practitioners and organizations enacting this approach saw the limits of relational strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Zaharna, 2016).

The fourth approach, *quiet antagonism* (lower right quadrant), has less grounding in existing public relations theories, but reflects an isolationist organizational streak, where the organization is avoiding engagement while not accepting external forces. Organizations regularly under siege by external forces may fight back, but may also find ways to avoid conflict, as in the case of the Texas university forced to implement campus carry gun policies not supported by the



organization at any level, or by the pharmaceutical manufacturer that would avoid participation in media opportunities deemed as unfair. Silence or retreat did not mean surrender or accommodation. Coorientation theory, as one example, does offer ways to conceptualize organizations' lack of understanding or acknowledgment of the positions of others (Broom, 1977; Broom & Dozier, 1990; Newcomb, 1953, 1956; Seltzer, 2007). So-called *false* positions could form the basis for choosing when to disengage. False positions occur when organizations and publics misperceive the positions of others, such as when organizations feel misunderstood by external groups, causing them to look inward and avoid engagement (Dozier & Ehling, 1992). Additionally, such misperceptions or perceived misperceptions could come from within organizations—such as internal publics that felt misunderstood by organizations—as demonstrated in multiple participant examples.

**Implications for dialogue, listening, and professionalism.** Participants repeatedly mentioned *dialogue* and *listening* as best practices. Yet, as in other studies, the descriptions of actions did not match with the literature's established definitions for either of these approaches (Sommerfeldt, & Yang, 2018). True *dialogue* (from a Buberian perspective) requires a willingness to set aside organizational power and move toward genuine compromise (e.g., Anderson, 2003; Buber, 1958; Cissna & Anderson, 1994; Kent & Lane, 2017; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Instead, practitioners seemed to embrace *dialogue-in-name-only* by emphasizing the importance of visible effort and engagement rather than the willingness to change (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Lane, 2018; Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015; Toledano, 2018). Similarly, while *listening* was one of the most-repeated terms across

interviews, descriptions of listening processes rarely moved beyond a monitoring of relevant issues to an openness to engage and evolve (Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2018b; Penman & Turnbull, 2012). While practitioners supported the act of listening and its visibility, they did not embrace the hallmarks of effective listening, including working to understand publics on their own terms (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2006; Place, 2019a).

In both cases, best practices expressed a variety of communicative actions that can be interpreted as rituals (Carey, 1989). This included the insistence of participants to support listening and dialogue as best practices, despite the clearly articulated importance of organizations embracing their own—potentially transgressive—values. This reinforces scholarship that points to the limits of dialogic approaches (Capizzo, 2018; Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Paquette, Sommerfeldt, & Kent, 2015; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012), as well as the complexity in the enactment of organizational listening (Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2018b; Place, 2019a). Practitioners spoke to the importance of these functions, and broadly to the values of symmetry, as ideals, but demonstrated a much wider variety of actions in practice. Managing intractable problems was challenging for practitioners to discuss in part because the professional vocabulary of public relations does not describe agonistic tactics. Lacking professional public relations terminology to describe their experiences, practitioners fell back onto language from public affairs, political communication, issues management, and other fields that emphasize contention. As practitioners clearly value their professionalism as part of their identity, individual

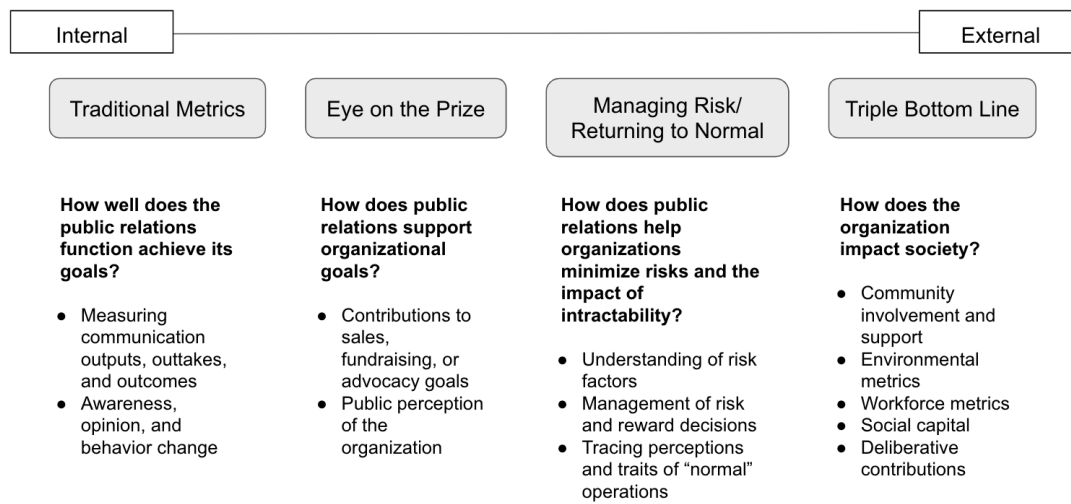
and organizational identities both must come into play as part of managing intractability.

**Dissensus as ethical practice.** Not only did practitioners explain that a dissensus perspective could be ethically supported, their responses—such as the government agency practitioner engaging with an ideologically diverse group of seniors regarding health care issues—demonstrated that it could be potentially more ethical than consensus-based approaches (Rancière, 1998). This reflects scholarship that positions some publics as holding untenable positions from the organizational perspective, whether they are seen as radical activists (Derville, 2005) or repugnant publics (Cancel et al., 1999). In the context of contentious issues and intractable problems, organizations must face the multitude of potentially conflicting values and narratives that exist regarding a single issue (Holtzhausen, 2000, 2000; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). The steps of polemical agonism provide a path toward ethically navigating intractability: Organizations should first generate their best possible position on the issue at hand—with the input of external publics—and engage with an awareness of their own power. In this way, using polemical agonism as an underlying process (Roberts-Miller, 2002), public relations practitioners with a dissensus mindset are positioned as “custodians of discourse” (Ciszek, 2016, p. 319) and emphasizing tolerance as a virtue (Davidson & Motion, 2018). As Lyotard (1998) explained, true consensus should be bounded by geographic and temporal circumstances. Public relations theory should question the ethics of attempts to impose or prioritize consensus beyond such bounds.

**Theorizing holistic measurement.** Grunig (2008) described four levels of analysis in public relations research: program, functional, organizational, and societal. While not neatly fitting into these four categories, placing the research approaches described by practitioners onto a similar continuum (wholly internal to fully external) reflects this understanding of measurement and evaluation at multiple levels of analysis. While significant progress has been made in standardizing evaluation and measurements of messages and campaigns (Michaelson, Wright, & Stacks, 2012; Rice & Atkin, 2013; Stacks, 2007), little has been made at the other end of the spectrum (organizational and societal), as indicated by the wider range of practitioner responses, or lack of measurement in these areas (Likely & Watson, 2013). In order to fully account for the impact on communities and societies, practitioners must incorporate societal-level measures, understanding their work and its implications beyond the organizational and immediate community impacts.

The variety of measurement approaches and situations put forth by practitioners also points to the need for agility in evaluation (van Ruler, 2014, 2015; Winkler & Etter, 2018). Contrary to measurement approaches focusing on pre-set objectives (Broom & Sha, 2013) and supported by the Barcelona Principles (Likely & Watson, 2013), such research activities should be seen beyond individual campaigns (Macnamara, 2015) and contextualized within the organization's broader mission and responsibilities to society. Practitioners able to employ flexible approaches during engagement will have a greater ability to incorporate external (and dissensual) perspectives and adjust to shifting measurement and evaluation needs.

**Fig. 5.3: Holistic Measurement for Intractable Scenarios**



**Holistic measurement.** The approach represents the variety of measurements needed to understand intended and unintended impacts of organizational actions in managing intractable problems. It groups these into four levels of analysis (J. Grunig, 2008), from internal (at the level of the public relations function) to societal. Practitioners should consider how best to measure and evaluate their work at each level. Not every tactic or campaign necessitates understandings across all four levels, but organizations would benefit from practitioners pushing themselves toward measuring several levels above, for example, the impact of a specific campaign on a specific public (Macnamara, 2015). The four levels should carry across formative, process, and summative evaluation techniques (Rice & Atkin, 2013; Stacks, 2010). This expands on a balanced scorecard approach (see Zerfass, 2008) to reflect facets at the levels of message/campaign, organizational goals, intractable issue, and societal/community.

*Traditional metrics.* Organizational messages should influence target publics. A wide variety of established public relations and persuasion metrics exist to measure campaign effectiveness, such as the impact of communication on awareness, opinion, and behavior for targeted groups (Rice & Atkin, 2013). Participants emphasized doing research to set baselines (J. Grunig, 2006) and setting objectives to ascertain accomplishment (Broom & Sha, 2013; Stacks, 2007).

*Eye on the prize.* Beyond measuring communication activity, these metrics focus on organizational goals to which public relations is a contributor. Repeatedly, participants brought up the importance of maintaining focus on the most important organizational goals when managing wicked problems. Practitioners should have larger organizational goals in mind when planning public relations programs (Broom & Sha, 2013; Macnamara, 2018a). It is at this level where practitioners emphasized the need to demonstrate the value of public relations to management (Michaelson, Wright, & Stacks, 2012).

*Managing risk/returning to normal.* As practitioners often prioritized the crisis elements of intractable problems, many of their approaches to understanding and evaluating success mirrored crisis communication approaches. Some of these focused on the organization and its reputation (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Jin, Pang, & Smith, 2018), while others focused on more community-based understandings such as reducing risk and uncertainty (Heath & McComas, 2015; Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016) and improving community outcomes (Liu & Fraustino, 2014; Sellnow, Seeger, & Ullmer, 2002). Evaluation at this level helps the practitioner gauge an organization's overall ability

to focus on its goals and objectives, rather than the previous level, which examines whether they have been achieved.

*Triple bottom line.* Organizations often are unable or unwilling to thoroughly track the impacts of their actions on communities and societies, some of which may be unexpected (Murphy, 2000). Rather than a focus on organization-relevant monitoring, this perspective represents a more open-ended listening approach (Place, 2019a). Adding this external perspective supports a perception of the organization as providing value beyond its internal objectives. Such contributions could come in the form of increased or improved CSR engagement (Margolis & Walsh, 2003), social capital (Ihlen, 2005; Saffer, 2016; Sommerfeldt, 2013a, 2013b; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2006), and deliberative contributions (Edwards, 2016; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). This could go as far as to include “agonistic metrics” to reflect the degree to which organizations had encouraged civic participation (Davidson & Motion, 2018, p. 407) and support the emergence of multiple narratives (Winkler & Etter, 2018).

**Value of post-positivist methods and postmodern concepts.** The dissertation integrated postmodern concepts such as dissensus and agonism with postpositivist methods to investigate the implications for praxis and ground findings in practitioner experiences. Scholars looking to combine diverse theoretical perspectives should not be dissuaded from integration, although it may require additional challenges in research design. In this dissertation, terminology became a central challenge as postmodern concepts were not often utilized by practitioners. Utilizing a variety of related terms, following a standardized and carefully articulated

introductory script, and allowing the participants to select the experiences for discussion all helped to (1) maintain focus on the main interview questions at hand and (2) allow for multiple checks if the discussion veered off track (Tracy, 2013). The value provided through investigating practitioner experiences functions, in part, to bridge the gap between postmodern concepts and professional practice (Toth, 2002). While such an approach can create tension between practical organizational outcomes and postmodern values, a postpositivist mindset for investigation allows an examination of practitioner data on its own terms—rather than through a critical or poststructural lens. This has the advantage of allowing practitioner language and priorities to catalyze the analysis, rather than a premeditated perspective. This provides the greatest chance of discovering practical applications for postmodern concepts, driven by participant insights.

### **Practical Implications**

Participants made it clear that intractable situations and their management formed a significant part of professional public relations. This necessitated a deeper understanding of their experiences with *intractable realities* and *managing intractability as professional practice*. It also involves looking at the situational impact of these perspectives and the recommendations they, as a whole, bring to practice. These include the *management implications of dissensus, undervalued internal communication, value balancing, and inclusive measurement*.

**Intractable realities.** Participants saw managing intractable problems as a crucial aspect of the work of public relations professionals. As more organizations face pressure to engage in contentious issues and take potentially divisive stands,



practitioners must be prepared to counsel on the civic role of organizations (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Sommerfeldt, 2013a). For example, participants who spoke to the related impact of messages on multiple publics or stakeholders—such as public health advocates balancing the need to craft messages that encouraged vaccinations among both those who agreed and did not agree with the supporting science or advocacy groups building diverse issue coalitions—envisioned the value of their relationships beyond the dyadic (Capizzo, 2018; Heath, 2013; Saffer, 2016; Saffer, Yang, & Taylor, 2018; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017). In order to effectively understand and manage intractable problems, practitioners must continue to prioritize community and civic conceptualizations of the public relations function (e.g., Hallahan, 2004; Heath, 2006; Kruckeberg, Starck, & Vujnovic, 2006; Taylor, 2018) and understand the potential for CSR expectations to act as a tool for organizational engagement in such issues (e.g., Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018; Scherer, Palazzo, & Baumann, 2006; Scherer et al., 2016; Stokes, 2016). This means that practitioners should continue to look for ways that organizations can act as good citizens and good neighbors, such as understanding the community consequences of their actions (Heath, 2006; Kruckeberg, Starck, & Vujnovic, 2006) and making civic contributions such as helping to solve shared problems (Edwards, 2016, Scherer et al., 2016). As societies expect more visible demonstrations of organizational citizenship, public relations practitioners can help guide management toward such opportunities.

**Managing intractability as professional practice.** Antagonistic engagement and non-consensus outcomes go against the professional norms as developed by PRSA and other professional organizations, despite their place within professional

practice. Identifying intractability and distinguishing best practices from professional norms surrounding crisis management creates a crucial strategic and tactical toolbox for practice. Beginning with the framework and knowledge around wicked problems in issues management (Coombs & Holladay, 2018), separating crises and intractability acknowledges that some issues are broader than the organization itself. A wicked problems perspective on issues (seeing them as shared, communal challenges) can help organizations and their leaders overcome a myopic, insular mindset—to begin to look at solutions and responsibilities as shared among members of a community. Among the relevant findings are the need for practitioners to understand contentious issues from a dissensual perspective (Ciszek & Logan, 2018) and the importance of incorporating agonistic tactics to address inherent conflict (Davidson, 2016).

***Best practices for intractable engagement.*** How did practitioners make the decision as to which of the four SIM engagement approaches they would support? Organizational values played a crucial role in driving the individual behavior of practitioners as well as organizational behavior. Professionalism also played a role, with the values of transparency, positivity, and neutrality/objectivity reflected in responses. For example, practitioners advocated for the public health and safety issues where they agreed fully with the organization's approach. Others disagreed with a client's approach, even if they agreed with their position—such as the counselor who encouraged a financial institution to keep its support for same-sex benefits private due to the politically polarized community. All value-driven choices made practitioners balance competing interests, but professional values such as

disclosure, civility, and objectivity often won out in their recommendations. Participants reiterated the best practice of making organizational decisions and advocating for them based on core values (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994). While some discussed these decisions as being, potentially, self-evident (such as for consumers of big brands with widely known values taking an expected stance), others mentioned the importance of sharing these rationales so that internal and external publics would understand the decision (Bigam Stahley & Boyd, 2006). Even if publics disagreed with the stance, explaining such a position could help them to acquiesce or, potentially, have a more positive view of the organization due to its effort to engage.

In one sense, such an evolution in practice is reflective of insights from issues management scholarship, much of which supports the alignment of organizational and societal values (e.g., Chase, 1984; Heath & Cousino, 1990; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Sethi, 1977). Yet, the recent inclusion of contentious social issues adds a wrinkle: Organizations are often asked to take sides on issues distant from their core business or organizational interests (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). In this way, *values* have taken on broader societal meaning, driven by growing consumer expectations (Dodd, 2018), than they would have had in older, more “traditional” issues management literature (e.g., Crable & Vibbert, 1983, 1985).

**Management implications of dissensus.** Practitioners expressed that organizations cannot expect consensus, particularly on divisive issues, and should aim for productive ways to work in environments of disagreement (Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Practitioners must understand the implications for organizations engaging in agonistic tactics, intractable issue discourse, or other forms of

brandstanding. While CSA may have positive potential business outcomes, it still involves significant risks based on public perception of the motivation for the actions. If the actions are perceived to be authentic or values-driven, there is a higher chance of a positive outcome. Actions seen as self-serving, according to participants, are likely open to backlash from publics and stakeholders.

A variety of tactics described by practitioners are commonplace in public relations practice, as well as integrated into scholarly literature. *Self defense* is part of accepted crisis communication and reputation management (Coombs, 2007). As an advocacy stance (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010), *fueling supporters* could be considered part of relationship management strategies as a way to strengthen existing relationships or change established networks to meet organizational ends (Ledingham, 2006; Saffer, Yang, & Taylor, 2018; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017). By contrast, *providing space for dissent* falls beyond the realm of the excellence theory (J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006), tracking more closely with issues management approaches that, in a rhetorical vein, understand the inherent complexity and dissonance inherent in the public sphere (e.g., Heath & Nelson, 1986; Heath, 2000; Heath, Waymer, & Palenchar, 2013). From a postmodern perspective, this reflects value placed on the little narrative, rather than imposing dominate organizational perspectives (Lyotard, 1984).

**Undervalued internal communication.** Internal communication served as an additional area of participant focus and practical interest. The appropriate and effective understanding of contentious issues has growing implications for organization-employee relationships (Shen, 2011) and employee activism (McCown,

2007). It extends this literature to look at employee or internal activists advocating for external causes, not only to improve their own circumstances or support an internal cause. In this light, organizations should understand and prepare for both internal and external causes of intractability. From an internal communication perspective, such issues should be understood and addressed as public relations challenges, not simply as management or HR issues. Deep, continuous involvement by professional communicators is crucial to managing them effectively. Intractability manifests within organizations, including during periods of unrest and change, such as mergers and unions negotiations. This underscores the value of ongoing relationship maintenance with internal publics (Shen, 2011), but also echoes the calls for a deeper understanding of internal activism and the nuances of managing employee communication (McCown, 2007).

**Value balancing.** Participants demonstrated their ability to make decisions and advise organizations based on an amalgamation of personal, professional, and organizational values (Place, 2019b). It was not surprising to hear from practitioners that they see the importance of proportional and appropriate organizational and communicative responses to intractable issues, and that those responses should be driven by organizational values. That said, the responses (such as avoiding engagement) presented a clear articulation of several approaches not necessarily covered by PRSA guidelines, excellence theory (J. Grunig, 2001; J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, 2006) or contingency theory (e.g., Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010). Choosing to not engage can take multiple forms. On one hand, this could be an

acceptance of or acquiescence to a position contrary to the organization's stance. On the other, a quiet stance in objection to the position of a public, community, or other organizations.

Practitioners also brought their individual professional values into decision making (Place, 2019b). On one hand, this exposed tensions between organizational and personal values, making work more difficult when practitioners lack such alignment in their work. At the same time, it reinforced practitioner perspectives as distinct from organizations—as counselors and advisors rather than tacticians. Practitioners utilized their personal judgment alongside professional perspectives, as evidenced by distinctions of age and experience in the desire to speak out on social issues.

**Inclusive measurement.** Practitioners should acknowledge and utilize measurement approaches from multiple points along the holistic measurement continuum. The full value of public relations can only be realized in the context of providing organizations with a complete representation of stakeholder perspectives, inside and outside of the organization, and consequences to organizational actions, intended and unintended. Upholding Macnamara's (2015) insights, measurement and evaluation should be (1) separate steps in a practitioner's process, and (2) should encompass multiple methodologies and move beyond a solely qualitative approach. Insights from past intractable scenarios should inform future situations, and management should understand research, measurement, and evaluation as an ongoing process. In this way, the constant cycle of research can inform both communication and management processes (Stacks, 2010).

Rather than focusing on avoiding or removing the chaos and complexity of intractable scenarios as quickly as possible, practitioners and organizations would benefit from seeing that “disorganization is necessary to organization and the chaos of crisis is linked to the routines of business as usual” (Sellnow, Seeger, & Ullmer, 2002, p. 290). Intractability is inevitable, and organizations should not consider avoidance or reduction of it as the only crucial metric. Risk management, as expressed by many participants may provide a more robust framework to manage and measure intractability in praxis.

### **Future Research Directions**

These empirical findings and their theoretical integration point toward a variety of areas for future research. As the study was devised with a broad sample of U.S. practitioners, more can be understood about the behaviors of specific organizational types, issue scenarios, and practitioner experiences.

**Values and risks at the inflection point.** An inflection point or turning point represents the key decision-making moment as to whether and how organizations engage in discourse on intractable issues. Participant responses indicated that risk/reward and organizational values were the main contributing factors determining how organizations would choose to manage an intractable situation. There are a number of additional factors that could contribute to such decisions. It would be instructive to examine (1) whether similar factors held up for a wider sample of practitioners and (2) whether organizational leaders followed similar or different factors in their own decision making. This could be explored through further

interview-based inquiry, case studies of organizations facing intractable problems, or through experiments that manipulate the three facets mentioned above.

**Deepening organizational perspectives.** Approaches to managing intractable problems varied based on the industry and type of organization. While some of these changes can be explained by differences in organizational values, focusing in on several understudied types of organizations would add significantly to understanding of such circumstances. B2B organizations, for example, might present distinct characteristics and preferred approaches to managing intractability given their lack of consumer stakeholders. By contrast, government agencies may prioritize certain engagement approaches given their mandate to citizen responsiveness. Both of these conjectures are based on initial evidence from several participants in this dissertation, but additional data on these types of organizations would be needed.

Intractable organizations and industries exposed uniquely high conflict areas from which scholars may be able to better understand the full range of managing intractability. For example, the challenges presented by urban public schools or highly vilified industries (e.g., tobacco, pharmaceuticals) provided a variety of obstacles for the intractable organization—brought on my negative public views toward teachers, administrators, school districts, and other actors (Pressgrove et al., 2019). Studying these organizations and situations for practitioners, through further interviews or, potentially, participant observation, may help to provide knowledge about some of the most challenging public relations work.

**Practitioner diversity.** While the geographic distribution in the sampling approach encouraged participants with a breadth of experiences and professional



settings, the study did not target a maximum variation sample for several additional areas, including gender, political affiliation, race, and sexual orientation or ensure that there was equivalent data from those with different identities.

While the gender balance reflected a majority of women practitioners, it did not explicitly examine questions of gender and power as part of the protocol or during the analysis process. Gender could play a role in the ways that practitioners understand and respond to intractable scenarios, as well as be a part of the selection (conscious or unconscious) of the types of public relations positions and industries that those of differing gender identities select.

As many of the intractable issues brought up were discussed within the context of politically polarized positions, future research could utilize an ideologically driven sample to ensure representative participation from a variety of perspectives. It would be helpful, given the contentious nature of many intractable issues, to systematically test this framework with a proactively diverse political sample. Such sampling could help illuminate whether any of the findings in this study were the result of political or ideological biases, or whether they hold for a broad set of practitioners.

Race and sexual orientation also may play a role in the ways that practitioner identity and power play into the decision-making processes of managing intractable problems. For example, practitioners who feel marginalized within their organizations may understand and balance values differently when faced with contention. Diversity in these areas was less well reflected in the sample, and future research on managing

intractable problems should seek to ensure strong representation across these areas in order to capture the full spectrum of experiences and challenges for practitioners.

**Internal issues and activism.** One of the most compelling clusters of issues to arise from the interviews were those of internal organizational challenges. The internal intractability created by such issues provides an important case for organizations facing challenges from employees, donors, or other stakeholders. Such research could shed light on both organizational best practices as well as critical scholarship about the role of corporations and their employees in democratic and deliberative processes regarding contentious issues, building on scholarship examining employee activism (McCown, 2007) and shareholder activism (Ragas, 2013; Uysal, 2014; Uysal & Tsetsura, 2015; Yang, Uysal, & Taylor, 2018). Additionally, mergers presented several rich cases that could be explored further to understand the potential for intractability found within the cultural and power dynamics of bringing two organizations together.

**Global engagement.** Many intractable issues cross national boundaries, as demonstrated by several practitioners with international or global experiences. Such scenarios raise additional questions about the global and multicultural responsibilities of corporations (J. Grunig, 2009; Monshipouri, Welch, & Kennedy, 2003) and the interactions of corporations and nations that have risen to the level of public (or corporate) diplomacy (L'Etang, 2009). Particularly at the global level, a lack of corporate regulation creates a higher public responsibility for corporate engagement and CSR (e.g., Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, 2011; Seele & Lock, 2015). Are there differences in the engagement incentives for transnational organizations (D. Verčič &

A. T. Verčič, 2007)? What additional factors might influence decision making? Case studies of transnational intractable problems, as well as interviews with global practitioners, could help better understand these scenarios.

**Preserving professional identity.** Managing intractability takes a personal toll on practitioners, including through the continual renegotiation of professional identities demonstrated by the participants in this study. While practitioners showed a commitment to ethics and an understanding of the societal and community implications of their work, multiple interviewees expressed the challenges in maintaining this high standard in the face of pressures from within the organization and perceptions of the profession as a whole. Scholarship on the management of intractable problems has the potential to provide insights for how practitioners can best manage such scenarios while maintaining their integrity and fulfilling professional responsibilities. Such research is crucial to elevating the profession as well as maintaining professional identity for those already straining to manage myriad technological and organizational changes in their field.

**Disambiguating intractability and crisis.** Several participants misidentified crises as intractable situations. When they did, intractability was equated with reputation damage (Coombs, 2007), rather than an unsolvable problem among organizations and stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). More often, organizational crises could be reinterpreted or understood as community-wide problems (Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016; Liu & Fraustino, 2014; Woods, 2016) with aspects of intractability. Therefore, practitioners drew on crisis communication experiences to describe situations that they understood as intractable under the

definition provided. All intractable problems are based in issues. Some intractable problems can become organizational or community crises. More research is needed to fully tease out the distinctions between crises and intractable problems, as well as to determine where best practices in management may overlap or diverge.

**Organizational power and engagement.** Practitioner responses to engagement demonstrated that organizations with little power (nothing to lose) or immense power (too big to fail) had less risk when engaging in contentious issues. This was not a finding articulated by practitioners, but one that revealed itself as a broader implication at the organizational level when responses were mapped based on the organization: Most practitioners followed this unexpected pattern of being more likely to support agonistic engagement or contentious issue engagement for low- or high-power organizations than for those in the middle. Practitioner wisdom in support of a relationship between organizational power and engagement could, with additional data and focused inquiry, become a particularly useful guide to SIM and risk management in practice.

**Measurement, evaluation, and effectiveness.** There are several levels of evaluation that merit further research. Testing best practices for social issues management in intractable scenarios opens the door to several possibilities, including the efficacy of sharing values-driven explanations for organizational actions and the potential benefits of using a holistic measurement and evaluation approach in praxis. Scholarship on research and measurement has focused on improving practitioner activities across time. Research has shown that such measurement should be agile (van Ruler, 2014, 2015) and ongoing (Stacks, 2010), but scholars can do more to

encourage multiple layers and levels of measurement (Zerfass, 2008), particularly at the community or societal level (Heath, 2006). Additional research to help organizations better connect their values to community- and society-based metrics could empower and support further engagement in potentially constructive deliberative discourse.

## **Limitations**

Despite efforts to alleviate them, this study still has limitations based on sampling and data collection. Additionally, the research process had the overarching limiting factors of a finite budget and time. Choices made during the execution of this study often presented trade-offs based on the goals of sampling diversity, privileging participant voices, and rigorous data collection and analysis practices.

**Sampling.** My recruitment approaches attempted to move beyond convenience and snowball sampling to reflect a geographically and experientially diverse set of participants. The wider the range of participant experiences in the sample, the more reflective the results should be to understand the phenomenon at hand for U.S. practitioners (Tracey, 2013). That said, the channels and processes I used (personal connections, snowball sampling, referrals from professionals, and outreach through PRSA) did have some limitations and effects on my results. First, the outreach materials provided enough detail about the project for participants to decide that they were interested in discussing the material or not. I see this as a potential biasing stage due to self-selection (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). For example, participants interested in discussing the issues at hand may be more likely to

prioritize the importance of contention as part of public relations practice, while those less interested are no less a part of practice.

Utilizing PRSA members and a large percentage of accredited professionals meant many participants shared a certain worldview of the role of public relations and the practitioner due to these experiences. Professionalism and professional pride was clearly reflected among the participants, the vast majority of whom are PRSA members, with 25 of 41 having earned the APR credential. This overrepresentation—less than 20% of PRSA members hold the APR designation (Wilson, 2013)—potentially shifted the results by favoring those with more experience and centralized training than the average practitioner. For example, this has the potential to bias results toward the main tenets of professionalism as outlined by the PRSA. As members of a professional organization, they may be more committed to the fostering of public relations as a profession and potentially less likely to embrace non-standard views of practice. Yet, as the PRSA tends to reflect the most involved, dedicated, and self-aware U.S. practitioners, the benefits outweighed the risks of utilizing this pool. Due to the sample, the data is bound geographically within the United States and to professional public relations practitioners, limiting global implications.

**Data collection.** There are several pros and cons of an interview-based project. First, while it allows for a deep understanding of practitioner experiences, the results are wedded to this perspective—practitioners are limited by their own vantage points as to understanding their actions and impact. Second, participants, particularly professional communicators who make a living defending organizational actions, can never be unbiased observers of their own actions or those of their employers and

clients. Scholarship must take multiple paths and perspectives—beyond qualitative interviews—in order to fully capture practitioner experiences, actions, and outcomes.

Prioritizing geographic and organizational diversity among my participants meant that interviews were conducted through mediated channels, including video chat (Skype and Google Hangouts) and over the phone. This created a challenge in that it meant a loss of the data, rapport, and connection that comes from conducting interviews in person (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). In this case, as the information discussed, while occasionally sensitive, was generally not deeply personal in nature, I did not feel as if the mediated nature of the interviews hindered the verbal data collection process. As noted in the methods section, I put a significant focus on the rapport building process at the beginning of the interview to minimize any potential discomfort or apprehension with the interview process (Tracy, 2013). That said, there were certainly cues, gestures, and other nonverbal signs that were missed due to the technological barriers between myself and the participants. Additionally, the challenges to rapport-building based on the nature of mediated interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014) meant that I used additional probes with some participants to ensure responses were fully explained, and to support the richness of the data collected (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). I wrote notes and memos about each interview to attempt to capture as much of this information as possible, but, given additional time and travel budget, the project would certainly have been preferable with face-to-face practitioner interviews.

While I provided a clear, multi-part definition of intractable issues that I shared with each participant, there was still room for interpretation as to the types of

situations they selected to discuss. As I was interested in capturing the meaning making perspective of the participants, I generally gave the participant the benefit of the doubt and let them explain why the issue fit, only stepping in on the rare occasions where the participants spoke specifically about a narrow organizational crisis. In this way, the approach prioritized practitioner experiences and meaning making in intractable scenarios. In doing so, it relied on their perspectives for what perspectives, strategies, and tactics are successful, rather than including any external validation for such findings. In this way, it limits results to the level of the practitioner in their organizational circumstances and does not address the impact or results of their work.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation sought to explore the full range of public relations practitioner meaning making and experiences when faced with managing intractable problems. Avoiding normative approaches and integrating concepts from postmodern theoretical frameworks, it attempted to excavate meaning from practitioners' day-to-day encounters with contentious issues. As technology and globalization change communication, cultures, and societies, scholars of public relations must grapple with the new networks, public spheres, and structures of power that undergird the profession (Castells, 2008; Raupp, 2011). Some have pointed to the challenges this creates for practitioners and the lack of oversight and accountability for organizations, particularly global corporations (Banerjee, 2010, 2014; Pal & Dutta, 2008). Others have emphasized the opportunity such new structures can provide, including looking inward to employees (McCown, 2007; Shen, 2011) as well as outward to the impact



on democratic societies (Edwards, 2016; Hiebert, 2013; Heath, 2001; Heath, Waymer, & Palenchar, 2013).

The experiences of public relations practitioners facing intractability adds several important contributions to the development of theory and praxis. First, the deepening awareness and definition of intractability extends social issues management and scholarship on wicked problems (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) by elaborating on the facets of such situations and developing a framework for engagement, including best practices. In doing so, it provides scholars and practitioners additional tools to explore the drivers, values, actions, and implications of highly contentious challenges organizations increasingly face given their role in civil society (Dodd, 2018; Logan, 2018). Next, it presents a new understanding of success, measurement, and evaluation, grounded in practitioner action: Ad hoc understandings of effectiveness. Rather than a highly standardized, singular tool, practitioners can and should model effectiveness in a given scenario on multiple factors. These should include measurements at the message, campaign, organizational, and societal levels (Grunig, 2008). Only by considering all of these perspectives can public relations measure and convey its true impact, intended and unintended.

Public relations scholarship and practice has long looked toward normative concepts such as excellence theory, relationship building, and consensus. These elements have provided a robust body of knowledge, actionable insights for practice, and tools to improve organizations and communities (Toth, 2010). Yet, by favoring normative conceptions of public relations that prefer consensus and prioritize

relationships, scholars miss the opportunity to understand the full scope of practice. Inclusivity toward managing intractable problems necessitates public relations scholars consider a definition of the field beyond the relational (Edwards, 2012): Communication, advocacy, and conflict must be considered integral parts of public relations theory and praxis. We need a variety of scholarly voices and a willingness to explore and apply postmodern concepts (Curtin, 2012). In turn, practitioners lack the guidelines to fully and ethically embrace a broader range of strategic actions. In this study, participants encountered intractability regularly and would benefit from more complete language to describe it, theories to support it, as well as the scholarly research to point toward best practices. Intractable problems serve as a lens through which scholars can better understand such issues and challenges in contentious situations (Willis, Trench, & Devins, 2018).

Previous research has laid the groundwork for understanding intractability, opening public relations theory to the point where it is prepared to tackle such issues. Scholars of contingency theory, dissensus, negotiation, chaos, complexity, and postmodernism have begun this process by bringing contention, disagreement, and difference closer to the center of analysis. They have pointed to the multitude of reasons why advocacy may be tactically preferable to consensus (e.g., Cancel et al., 1997; Kim & Cameron, 2016; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010), the perils of a rigid adherence to plans (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2010a, 2010b; van Ruler, 2014, 2015), the benefits of positivity and perseverance in the face of challenges (Plowman, 2007; Willis, 2016), and the potential organizational value of dissensus perspectives (e.g., Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018) and agonistic

engagement (e.g., Davidson, 2016; Davidson & Motion, 2018; Willis, Tench, & Devins, 2018). The next steps can come from further integration and embrace of postmodern concepts and perspectives for practitioners. Although participants did not use the term, agonistic tactics are a daily part of professional practice (Davidson, 2016). Many participants demonstrated, particularly in times of contention, an understanding of a dissensual perspective on public relations—that publics generally will not agree, and that communication in such scenarios is, by nature, divisive (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Mouffe, 1999).

The public relations function and organizational empowerment of a public relations sensibility can support pro-social outcomes. But those are just as likely to be found by moving an organization toward potential risks or by alienating certain groups as they are by minimizing risk or strengthening relationships. To move forward, public relations must reassess its ideas of engagement, not shying away from the ways in which dissensus perspectives can contribute to more socially aware organizations (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). The path forward for public relations scholarship and practice lies not in a single paradigm or perspective, but on the richness of a diverse field and a willingness to ground scholarship in practice without limiting ourselves to its worldview (Toth, 2010). Contention, intractability, and uncertainty permeate organizational life. The continuing relevance of public relations scholarship depends on how research helps organizations to perceive their environments: As potential activist threats (J. Grunig, 1997; J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984)? Or as an evolving story they can play a part in writing (Heath, 2000; Winkler & Etter, 2018)? Engaging in potentially divisive discourse is not always the right choice for

organizations. Yet, an awareness of external environments and an understanding of the civic implications of engagement is a step toward organizational acceptance of their responsibilities to communities (Heath, 2006; Taylor, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Public relations and its practitioners should be empowered to help societies solve intractable problems with the power and resources of organizations at their disposal.

## Appendix A: Participant & Interview Information

Table 1

### *Participant Background Information and Interview Data*

	Medium	Length	Current Job Title (Representative)	Current organization type	Years Exp.	Agency/ In-House	Areas of Expertise	Geography (based in...)
#1	Hangouts	53	VP Marketing	Tech Startup	6	5	PR, Marketing, Management, Journalism	Utah, Mississippi
#2	Hangouts	48	Communications Manager	Major Public University	15	5	Media Relations, Internal Communication	Michigan
#3	Skype	64	Senior Vice President	Global PR Agency	35	2	Global PR, Media Relations, Public Affairs	D.C., China
#4	Hangouts	52	PR Manager	Local quasi-gov nonprofit	16	5	Digital/Social Media, Media Relations, Interna Communication	Michigan
#5	Skype	44	Senior Manager, Global Marketing	B2B Health Care Company	12	3	PR, Marketing, Internal Communication	Michigan
#6	Hangouts	54	Vice President	Local PR Agency	8	2	PR, Digital Marketing, Media Relations	Michigan
#7	Hangouts	42	Vice President	Global Integrated PR Agency	11	2	PR, Marketing, IMC, Digital/Social Media, Ads	Illinois, Michigan
#8	Hangouts	49	VP Communication	B2B Technology Company	11	5	Marketing, PR, Video Production, Public Affairs	Michigan
#9	Skype	54	VP Comm, North America	Global Staffing Company	25	3	PR, Internal Communication, Leadership/Coaching	Maryland
#10	Phone	44	Account Director	Global PR/Marketing Agency	9	2	Digital Marketing, Social Care, PR, Advertising	Michigan
#11	Skype	53	Vice President	Global PR/Marketing Agency	15	1	B2B, Marketing Management, Media Relations, Crisis, Research	Texas, Belgium
#12	Skype	42	Director of PR Executive Director/PR	Midwest State Association (Healthcare)	15	5	Media Relations, Social Media, Events, Internal Communication	Ohio
#13	Phone	53	Director	Major Regional Hospital	32	5	Media Relations, Stakeholder Management, Events	Michigan
#14	Hangouts	56	US Media Manager	Global Educational Publisher	6	2	Content Creation Media Relations, Social/Digital Media,	Maryland, D.C.
#15	Hangouts	53	Senior Account Exec	Regional PR Agency	8	2	Digital Analytics	D.C.
#16	Phone	66	Director of PR	National Shipping/Retail Chain	15	5	Media Relations, Public Affairs, Marketing	San Diego
#17	Phone	63	Director of PR Center	University Research Center	32	3	Strategy, Media Relations, Issues Management	California
#18	Skype	50	VP Communication	Major Global Foundation	25	5	Media Relations, Crisis Communication, Advocacy	Maryland, D.C.
#19	Skype	56	Director of Communication	STEM College, Major Southwest University	23	5	Media Relations, Digital/Web Communication, Marketing	Texas
#20	Phone	74	VP Media Relations	Regional Midwest PR Agency	26	2	Media Relations, B2B, Marketing	Wisconsin, Florida
#21	Skype	45	VP Media Relations	National Telecom Company: Regional	16	3	Media Relations, Event Planning, Internal Communication	Texas, Arizona

	Medium	Length	Current Job Title (Representative)	Current organization type	Years Exp.	Agency/ In-House	Areas of Expertise	Geography (based in...)
#22	Skype	51	PR Director	Major Southwest Public University	17	5	Media Relations, Marketing, Internal Communication	Texas
#23	Phone	53	Founder/Owner	Regional PR Agency	21	1	Media Relations, Crisis/Issues Management	California
#24	Skype	68	Director of Communications	Regional Hospital, Semi-rural midwest	14	2	Community Relations, Political Communication	Michigan
#25	Skype	56	Director of Strategic PR	Regional PR Agency	23	1	Media Relations, Internal Communication, Crisis Management	North Carolina
#26	Skype	77	Founder/Owner	Regional PR Agency	19	1	Media Relations, Internal Communication, Crisis Communication	Florida
#27	Phone	59	Director of Communication	Major City School District	11	5	Media Relations, Crisis Communication, Community Relations	Tennessee
#28	Phone	63	VP Marketing	Regional Financial Institution, South	17	5	Media Relations, Multimedia Production, Advocacy	Alabama
#29	Phone	49	Director of PR Marketing & Communications	Midsized Private University	31	5	Media Relations, Crisis Communication, Internal Communication	Ohio
#30	Phone	50	Director	Regional Affordable Housing Nonprofit	18	5	IMC, B2B, Strategic Counsel	Indiana
#31	Phone	54	Communication Specialist	Major Telecom Company	8	4	Employee Communication, Media Relations	Colorado
#32	Phone	68	Executive Director: PR; Senior consultant	Major Universities; National Associations	39	3	Strategic Planning, Media Relations, Crisis Communication	Maryland, Virginia
#33	Phone	46	AVP PR	Global Insurer	29	5	B2B, Media Relations, Crisis Communication	Massachusetts
#34	Skype	59	VP Public Relations	Major Pharmaceutical Company	26	2	Client/Strategic Management, Media Relations, Marketing Issues Management, Agency Management, CSR	New Jersey
#35	Phone	57	Agency Executive	Major Global Agency	46	1	Media Relations, Marketing/Advertising, Internal communication	New York
#36	Phone	66	Agency Principal/Owner	Local agency	25	3	Branding, Integration, Media Relations	Maine
#37	Phone	44	Regional President	Major Global Agency	34	2	Media Relations, IMC, Member/Internal	New York, Georgia
#39	Phone	66	National PR Director	Business Regulatory/Advocacy Association	33	4	Communication	New York
#40	Phone	58	CMO	Global Consumer Products Company	43	2	Corporate Communication, Crisis Management	Oregon
#41	Skype	56	Director of public relations	Regional PR/Marketing Agency	21	2	Media Relations, Advocacy Communication, Marketing	Iowa

*Note.* The table provides information about each of the participants, including several descriptive characteristics, such as the medium of the interview (Skype, Google Hangouts, or phone), the length in minutes, a representative job title (one equivalent, but not identical to the participants—for confidentiality), and their current organization or industry. Additionally, participants provided some background information, such as skills where they felt they had expertise, geographic areas where they had practiced (by state), and years of practice. All of these details were self reported. Finally, based on their years of experience at agency or in-house positions, I assigned them a score from 1 (100% agency) to 5 (100% in-house) to help contextualize their narratives.

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for your time to participate in this study. This study will focus on the discussion of intractable problems for organizations that public relations practitioners must manage as part of their work. Participants will share their views and experiences from their perspectives as communication professionals. There are no direct benefits to participants. However, in the future, public relations practitioners and scholars may benefit from a better understanding of such intractable problems.

The interview will last 45-75 minutes. Interview questions will focus on how public relations practitioners understand and manage intractable problems. Examples of questions include:

- How would you counsel an organization to manage publics who are diametrically opposed to their viewpoints?
- How would you recommend handling a scenario where an organization was compelled to take a stand on a divisive issue?

Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing electronic data in a password protected computer and hardcopy data in a locked cabinet of a locked office.

I would like to ask your permission to record this interview for accuracy. Your participation is voluntary and you can decline to answer specific questions or to end your participation at any time.

[Consent form for face-to-face Interview]

**Do you agree to participate and be audiotaped?** [If yes, let the participant read and sign the consent form and continue. If the participant agrees to participate but not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If the participant does not agree to participate, stop.]

[Oral consent for telephone interview or Skype interview]

**I have the signed copy of your consent form, but I'll just ask you once again for the record: Do you agree to participate in this study and be audiotaped?** [If yes, turn on the recorder and continue. If the participant agrees to participate but not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If the participant does not agree to participate, stop.]

### Questions

#### [Opening Questions]

1. Please describe your professional experience in public relations.
  - a. Education?
  - b. Years of experience?
  - c. Industries/specialties?
  - d. Career trajectory?

- e. Current role?
2. Tell me about the public relations function in your organization.
    - a. How is it structured?
    - b. Where do you fit in?

Next, I'd like to discuss a specific type of problem for public relations professionals: intractable or "wicked" problems. I'll ask a few questions about these types of situations. Then, I'll provide a brief scenario and ask you to consider how you would act or respond given that situation in your work.

**[RQ1: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of managing intractable problems?]**

Intractable problems are those that are contentious and solution-resistant, where both sides are dug in to their position, and where there is no clear path toward compromise or negotiation. Examples in the U.S. would include climate change, immigration, same-sex marriage or gun rights/gun control.<sup>14</sup> These could be situations where an organization is at the center of the debate (where the issue at hand is related to a core value of the organization), or, more often, when they are drawn in circumstantially to public discourse.

3. Have you faced this type of issue in your work?
  - a. If so, please describe it.
  - b. If not, have you seen a similar scenario within your industry?
4. How do you understand managing such a situation to be part of your PR work?<sup>15</sup>
5. How might managing such a situation be distinct from your other PR work?
6. In these circumstances, what additional considerations might come into play within your organization?<sup>16</sup>

**[RQ2: How, if at all, do public relations practitioners understand dissensus to be a part of their communication efforts?]**

7. Have you had to communicate with publics who do not understand the point of view of your organization? If so, in what contexts?

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<sup>14</sup> This definition is based primarily on Coombs and Holladay's (2018) definition, as well as reflecting core facets of Rittel and Webber's (1973) understanding.

<sup>15</sup> These questions attempt to probe practitioner meaning making around wicked problems by asking about their experiences and how such issues are different/distinct from the rest of their work. It builds on Lindlof and Taylor's (2011) definition of meaning making as about understanding, describing, and engaging with the concept at hand, as well as attempting to unpack some of the *lifeworld* conceptions: How might practitioners be doing this type of work without realizing it?

<sup>16</sup> See contingency theory perspectives (Pang, Jin & Cameron, 2010).



8. Have you had to communicate to distinct publics of your organization who disagree with each other? If so, please describe the situation and how you handled it?<sup>17</sup>
9. How is managing such entrenched disagreement as part of your work as a PR professional?<sup>18</sup>
10. How do you approach managing these kinds of difficult situations?

**[Scenario]** For the next set of questions, imagine for a moment that you are the PR director for a fast-growing start-up, Vaccess, which has developed a new mobile app to help parents manage vaccinations for their children. They received significant government and foundation funding as part of their mission to increase the number of children vaccinated. The organization has recently come under fire from prominent anti-vaccine movement leaders, who have, through a campaign of social media antagonism driven by their followers, made it nearly impossible for them to go about its usual methods of communication. This has limited the company's growth and become a point of frustration for funders and investors, some of whom are threatening to pull out.<sup>19</sup>

11. How would you, as the PR director, prioritize the problems faced by the company? (also relevant for RQ 3)
12. How would you, as the PR director, advise management to handle the situation? (also relevant for RQ 3)
  - a. What research might you undertake?
  - b. How would you identify and understand the stakeholders involved?
  - c. What strategies might you use?
    - i. How might these strategies differ from standard approaches?
13. What would be a good outcome?<sup>20</sup>
  - a. How would you define it?
  - b. How might you measure it?
14. What, from your perspective, would be the key obstacles for achieving that "good outcome"?

[RQ3: What best practices do practitioners believe they should follow when faced with wicked problems?]

15. What best practices would you recommend for practitioners facing these types of challenges?

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<sup>17</sup> This question reflects an understanding of the organization in its environment beyond a one-to-one relationship (Bakhtin, 1981; Heath, 2013; Zaharna, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> See Coombs and Holladay (2018) as well as contingency theory (e.g., Pang, Jin & Cameron, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> This scenario uses an organization's core value to drive a conflict with activist publics, as in Ciszek and Logan (2018).

<sup>20</sup> See Macnamara (2016, 2018) on measurement, evaluation, and distinct understandings of success.

16. How would you counsel an organization to manage publics who are diametrically opposed to their viewpoints?<sup>21</sup>
  - a. When should they engage with such publics or avoid them?<sup>22</sup>
17. How would you recommend handling a scenario where an organization was compelled to take a stand on a divisive issue?<sup>23</sup>
18. How might organizations prepare for the management of wicked problems?<sup>24</sup>

**[RQ4: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of effectiveness, measurement, and evaluation in the context of wicked problems?]**

19. How do you understand *effectiveness* in the context of wicked problems?<sup>25</sup>
  - a. What would effectiveness look like to you in the context of managing a difficult situation with no real solution?
  - b. How would you know whether your work managing such a situation was successful or not?
20. How do you understand *measurement* in the context of wicked problems?
  - a. What might you measure to quantify the effectiveness of this type of issue management?
  - b. What indicators might demonstrate progress?
21. How do you understand *evaluation* in the context of wicked problems?
  - a. What evaluation approaches would you use in this situation?
  - b. What types of evaluation tools would you use in this situation?
22. Generally, how would you recommend evaluating success in the context of wicked problems?
23. What factors (within and outside the organization) could come into play to evaluate success?<sup>26</sup>
24. How might organizational needs be balanced with external factors?<sup>27</sup>
25. Could you see any potential benefits to organizations and practitioners engaging with publics to manage wicked problems?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> This draws from conflict resolutions (Plowman, 2005) as well as dissensus (Ciszek & Logan, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> See Ciszek (2016) on *if*, *when*, and *how* practitioners engage in dissensus communication.

<sup>23</sup> See Ganesh and Zoller (2012) regarding agonism and contention as well as Stokes and Rubin (2010).

<sup>24</sup> See Van Ruler (2015) regarding agile planning.

<sup>25</sup> Additional probes have been added to the following questions to be used (if needed) to help clarify these difficult concepts.

<sup>26</sup> See Edwards (2018) on community impacts and Zerfass (2008) on balanced scorecards.

<sup>27</sup> See Murphy (2010) and Plowman (1998) on understanding multiple points of view for conflict resolution.

<sup>28</sup> See Davidson (2016) and Lyotard (1984) regarding the potential positives of engaging in agonistic or dissensual discourse.

### **[Conclusion]**

These are all my questions, thank you for taking the time to participate in the study. I really appreciate you sharing your experiences.

- 26. Is there anything else you would like to mention?
- 27. Are there any other questions that you would have asked if you were me?
- 28. Can you recommend others I should speak with?
- 29. May I follow up with you if I have any additional questions or need additional clarification?

## Appendix C: Consent Form

<b>Project Title</b>	Managing Wicked Problems
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	<i>This research is being conducted by <b>Luke Capizzo</b> at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are currently working as a public relations practitioner in the U.S. The purpose of this study is to examine how public relations practitioners manage intractable or highly polarizing issues as part of their work.</i>
<b>Procedures</b>	<p><i>The interview will last 45-75 minutes. Interview questions will focus on how public relations practitioners understand and manage intractable problems. Examples of questions include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How would you counsel an organization to manage publics who are diametrically opposed to their viewpoints?</i></li> <li>• <i>How would you recommend handling a scenario where an organization was compelled to take a stand on a divisive issue?</i></li> </ul> <p><i>There will also be several questions about professional history and self-identification as a public relations practitioner.</i></p> <p><i>You will be informed of the researcher's wish to audiotape the interview for purposes of accuracy; however, you will have the right to decline being audio recorded. Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from participation at any time. In-person interviews may take place at your office, your home, interviewer's office, or public places such as a café or restaurants.</i></p> <p>_____ <b><i>I agree to be audiotaped</i></b>          _____ <b><i>I do not agree to be audiotaped</i></b>  <i>(please check one)</i>  <i>If you decline being audiotaped, the investigator will take notes instead.</i></p>
<b>Potential Risks and Discomforts</b>	<i>Because interviews may be audio recorded, there is a potential for identification. To ensure this risk is addressed, you will be informed that your participation is voluntary and that you can decline to answer specific questions or to end your participation at any time. You may also decline to be recorded, in which case the investigator will take notes instead. Additionally, the investigator will assign pseudonyms for the participants and the newspapers they work for. While participants may offer suggestions for additional potential participants, the identity of participants will not be shared with others. The names of those that offer recommendations will not be shared and those that make a recommendation will not be informed</i>

	<i>if the officers they recommend end up participating or not. Please refer to the confidentiality section for more information.</i>
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	<i>There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, the outcomes of the project may provide some insight for public relations practitioners and organizations facing intractable or polarizing issues</i>
<b>Confidentiality</b>	<p><i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing electronic data in a password protected computer and hardcopy data in a locked cabinet of a locked office. Only the principal investigator, Luke Capizzo, and Dr. Erich Sommerfeldt, the supervisor of the research project, will have access to the audio records and transcripts of the interview. The interview transcripts will have the participant's name removed and replaced with a pseudonym.</i></p> <p><i>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i></p>
<b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b>	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><i>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</i></p> <p><b>Luke Capizzo</b>  <b>Ph.D. candidate, Department of Communication, UMD</b>  <b>2130 Skinner Building, capizzo@umd.edu, 248-229-1679</b></p>
<b>Participant Rights</b>	<p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>University of Maryland College Park</b>  <b>Institutional Review Board Office</b>  <b>1204 Marie Mount Hall</b>  <b>College Park, Maryland, 20742</b>  <b>E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a></b>  <b>Telephone: 301-405-0678</b></p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of</i></p>

	<i>Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i>	
<b>Statement of Consent</b>	<i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</i>	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please Print]</b>	
	<b>SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT</b>	
	<b>DATE</b>	

## **Appendix D: Recruitment Script**

### **Email Script**

Subject line: Financial journalism research project—Luke Capizzo

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Luke Capizzo and I am a doctoral candidate with the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am conducting research to examine how public relations practitioners understand intractable, polarizing, difficult-to-manage problems in their professional practice.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at UMD and is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Erich Sommerfeldt. He can be reached at [esommerf@umd.edu](mailto:esommerf@umd.edu) should you have any concerns about this study.

You are eligible for participating in this study since you are currently a public relations practitioner with more than five years of experiences, as well as being at least 18 years old. If you take part in this study, you would be involved in a 45-75 minute semi-structured interview. Interview questions will focus on how public relations practitioners understand and manage intractable problems.

Participants will be audio recorded. The identity of all participants will be kept anonymous. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions about the study, please email [capizzo@umd.edu](mailto:capizzo@umd.edu) or call 248-229-1679.

I appreciate your consideration of participating in this study and hope to hear back from you soon. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Luke Capizzo  
University of Maryland, College Park  
Office: Skinner 2101E  
Cell: [248-229-1679](tel:248-229-1679)  
Email: [Capizzo@umd.edu](mailto:Capizzo@umd.edu)

**Phone Script**

Hello this is Luke Capizzo. I am a doctoral candidate with the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am conducting research to examine how public relations practitioners understand intractable, polarizing, difficult-to-manage problems in their professional practice.

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at UMD and is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Erich Sommerfeldt. He can be reached at [esommerf@umd.edu](mailto:esommerf@umd.edu) should you have any concerns about this study.

You are eligible for participating in this study since you are currently a public relations practitioner with more than five years of experiences, as well as being at least 18 years old. If you take part in this study, you would be involved in a 45-75 minute semi-structured interview. Interview questions will focus on how public relations practitioners understand and manage intractable problems.

Participants will be audio recorded. The identity of all participants will be kept anonymous. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty.

Are you interested in participating in this study?



## **INITIAL APPLICATION PART 2: Managing Wicked Problems**

### **1. Abstract:**

The purpose of this study is to examine how public relations practitioners understand intractable, polarizing, difficult-to-manage problems in their professional practice. In order to protect privacy, the identities of participants will remain confidential. Only the Principal Investigator (Luke Capizzo) and project advisor (Dr. Erich Sommerfeldt) will have access to the audio recordings, data, and questionnaires. Data will be stored securely on the student investigator's computer and physical data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. No deception is involved in this study.

### **2. Subject Selection:**

a. Recruitment: Interview participants will be current public relations practitioners in the United States. Potential participants will be contacted individually by publicly available email or phone (a copy recruitment script is included in the application). Additional potential participants may be obtained through the snowball method.

b. Eligibility Criteria: The only requirements are that the participants are 18 years of age or older and have practiced public relations professionally for at least five years.

c. Rationale: This project engages with public relations practitioners to examine the ways in which they (and their organizations) attempt to manage the increasingly complex and polarized issues of our time. As social media, activist pressure, and societal forces for transparency have raised the acknowledged level of anticipated corporate stances on such issues, it is imperative that scholars investigate the perspectives of the practitioners involved.

d. Enrollment Numbers: I will recruit up to 60 participants, who are active public relations practitioners in the United States. I will contact them by email, phone, or through personal contacts.

e. Rationale for Enrollment Numbers: 60 participants is considered a valid study size for this type of in-depth qualitative interview methodology.

### **3. Procedures:**

Potential participants will be approached by the student investigator by email or phone inviting them to participate in the study. If the participant agrees to participate, then I will set up a time and a meeting place where the participant feels comfortable speaking, whether it is in their office or in a more natural place. If the participant is unable to meet in person or they reside outside of the mid-Atlantic region, then I will set up a time to conduct the interview by phone or by Skype. The interviews will take place between February 2019 and August 2019. There will be no follow-up interviews, however, I do ask for the participants' permission to contact them if I encounter a question about their responses while transcribing the interview. It is

unlikely that there will be a need to contact them since the interviews will be recorded.

The interview will last 45-75 minutes. Interview questions will focus on how public relations practitioners understand and manage intractable problems. Examples of questions include:

- How would you counsel an organization to manage publics who are diametrically opposed to their viewpoints?
- How would you recommend handling a scenario where an organization was compelled to take a stand on a divisive issue?

There will also be several questions about professional history and self-identification as a public relations practitioner.

Participants will be informed of the researcher's wish to audiotape the interview for purposes of accuracy; however, participants will have the right to decline being audio recorded. If participants decline being audio recorded, the investigator will take notes instead. All participation is voluntary, and participants may withdraw from the study at any time. Participants will be asked to sign consent forms or agree orally when the interview is conducted through phone or Skype to participate in the study. To ensure anonymity, the student investigator will assign pseudonyms. No specific personal identifiers, will be recorded. All the interviews will be conducted in English.

#### **4. Risks:**

Since the interviews may be audio recorded, this project could present some risk to participants. To ensure this risk is addressed, participants will be informed that their participation is voluntary and that they can decline to answer specific questions or to end your participation at any time. Participants may also decline to be recorded, in which case the investigator will take notes instead. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants and the names of their organizations. The potential risks and benefits will be explained to all potential interview participants before their participation begins.

#### **5. Benefits:**

There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, the outcomes of the project may provide some insight for public relations practitioners and organizations facing intractable or polarizing issues. The potential risks and benefits will be explained to all potential interview participants before their participation begins.

#### **6. Confidentiality:**

In order to protect the identity and privacy of participants, participant identity will remain confidential. The student investigator (Luke Capizzo) will assign a pseudonym to each participant. Actual names will not appear on interview data. The key linking the real participants to the pseudonyms will be kept in a separate document on the student investigator's computer in a separate folder away from the folder with interview data. Data will be securely stored on the principle investigator's personal laptop and on a flash drive. All files and drives will be password protected.

Any hard copies of data will remain in the student investigator's personal office in a locked file cabinet.

Only the student investigator, Luke Capizzo, will have access to the key linking the real participants to the pseudonyms. Only the principal investigator (Luke Capizzo) and the project advisor (Dr. Erich Sommerfeldt) will have access to the audio records and transcripts of the interview. All data will be destroyed when their use is no longer needed, but not before a minimum of ten years after data collection.

Additionally the interview responses from the participants will not be shared with other participants. Only the student investigator, Luke Capizzo, and the project advisor, Dr. Erich Sommerfeldt, will have access to the transcripts of the interviews. Also, to maintain the privacy of participants the names of participants will not be shared with other participants. While snowballing may be used for obtaining new participants, the name of the journalist that recommended a potential participant will not be shared.

#### **7. Consent Process:**

I have addressed all consent points in the document titled "Consent Form." Potential interview participants will be provided a brief summary of the research in emails or through telephone calls requesting their participation (see attached phone/email recruitment script). There is no deception in the information, which will be presented in plain language.

The investigator will read the information with the brief summary and participants' rights as it appears in the beginning of the interview protocol prior to each interview. The text will contain information about the study, the investigators, participants' rights, contact information for the Principal Investigator and the IRB office.

Participants will be informed that the participation is voluntary. Participants will be asked to indicate their consent by signing the consent form. If the participant cannot conduct the interview in person, then the consent form will be emailed, signed, scanned and returned by the participant. Lastly, if interviewing on the phone or through Skype, consent will be obtained again at the start of the conversation just to confirm that they read the consent form and are willing to participate. All participants will receive a copy of the consent form for their records.

#### **8. Conflict of Interest:**

No conflict of interest.

#### **9. HIPAA Compliance:**

Not applicable.

#### **10. Research Outside of the United States:**

Not applicable.

#### **11. Research Involving Prisoners:**

Not applicable.

**12. Supporting Documents:**

Your Initial Application must include a completed Initial Application Part 1 (On-Line Document), the information required in items 1-11 above, and all relevant supporting documents including: consent forms, letters sent to recruit participants, questionnaires completed by participants, and any other material that will be presented, viewed or read to human subject participants.

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