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7 Community as a Foundation for Public Relations Theory and Practice

KIRK HALLAHAN
Colorado State University

This essay argues that community serves as a viable theoretical foundation for the development of public relations theory and practice. Four arguments are set forth, based on (a) the pervasiveness of the community idea and ideal in everyday life and contemporary scholarship, (b) conceptual limitations rooted in the widely accepted focus on publics in public relations, (c) the emerging recognition of community-related theories in public relations scholarship, and (d) the strength of community building as a philosophy to drive public relations practice.

Our theory is that public relations is better defined and practiced as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community. (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988, p. xi)

[P]ublic relations must begin to think of our publics and our organizations in the sense of community. (Wilson, 1996, p. 74)

Recent observations that community represents the essence of public relations underscore the need for public relations theorists to reexamine critically many of the central concepts and assumptions that comprise public relations theory and practice.

For 8 decades, public relations practitioners since Bernays (1923) have talked about “the public” and “publics.” Researchers, however, have devoted little theoretical attention to the idea of publics (Botan & Soto, 1998) or alternative frameworks in which to analyze public relations (Toth & Heath, 1992).

Despite the ubiquity of the public construct, a strong argument can be made for positioning community as the conceptual centerpiece for examining and practicing public relations. Indeed, the field might be better called “community relations.” Making that case, however, requires going beyond limited conceptualizations to examine the community construct broadly.

Correspondence: Kirk Hallahan, Department of Journalism and Technical Communication, Colorado State University, C-225 Clark, Fort Collins, CO 80525; email: Kirk.hallahan@colostate.edu

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Following a brief review of the community construct, this chapter argues that there are separate pragmatic, theoretical, and philosophical reasons that community could serve as a viable and useful foundation for the development of public relations theory and practice. The pragmatic argument revolves around the resonating nature of the community construct itself, which has received increased attention among communication and other scholars. The theoretical argument is that community is a broader and richer concept compared to publics, the accepted focus of most public relations theory-building. At the same time, public relations scholars have recognized a variety of new theoretical approaches to the study of public relations that dovetail with the community concept. Finally, the philosophical argument contends that, as Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) suggested, public relations should be looked upon as a process of building and preserving communities—versus the adversarial (and often reactionary) reconciliation of organizational and public goals.

DEFINING COMMUNITY

Community is one of the murkiest concepts in the social sciences and humanities. Its Latin root is the same as that for communication, common, and commune: *communis*. The term *community* dates from the 14th century in its Middle English and French forms. A cursory look at one dictionary finds 11 meanings.

J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) pointed to the multiplicity of meanings associated with the term. The text authors suggest community can be thought of either as a locality or as a nongeographic grouping of interest, such as the scientific community or the business community. They explained:

Nearly all community relations programs are designed for the first kind of community. The second definition of community is essentially the definition we have given to a public—a group with a common problem or interest, regardless of geographic location. (p. 286)

Elsewhere, J. Grunig (1989a) observed that communities can be classified according to the number and variety of publics found within them. By this analysis, a *pluralistic community* includes more than one public.

Burke (1999) argued that the goal of the community relations function in public relations should be for organizations to become the “neighbors of choice.” This requires building relationships; establishing practices and procedures that anticipate and respond to community expectations, concerns, and issues; and focusing on support programs that respond to community concerns and strengthen the quality of community life. Lundborg (1950) noted that traditionally the *community public* has been considered the most “tangible and visible public” (p. 3) for organizations because its members are in close proximity to an organization’s operations and often become customers, employees, and investors. The importance

of geographic community publics often is less obvious than the impact of these other groups, which engage in direct economic exchanges with the organization. Nevertheless, community publics are important because they provide other needed resources (e.g., natural, physical, human, or political) required for an organization's success. Banks (1995) pointed out that traditional community relations has received less attention in recent years. Similarly, although community relations remains a critical part of the public relations practice, community relations receives comparatively little theoretical attention from scholars (e.g., Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1977). Most recent articles have focused on case studies (e.g., Henry, 1993; Mitchell & Schnyder, 1989; Tilson & Stacks, 1997).

Alternative Views of Community

A wide range of definitions and characteristics of community can be found in the sociology and anthropology literature (Chekki, 1989). Mendelbaum (1972) for example stated, "A man's community is, quite simply, the set of people, roles, and places with whom he communicates." For purposes of the present argument, a useful distinction is to think of these definitions on a continuum from purely geographic communities to purely symbolic communities.

Geographic communities are what many individuals consider the traditional meaning of the term. Sociologists' interest in geographic community can be traced to Tönnies' (1887/1988) distinction between *gemeinschaft* (i.e., localized rural folk life or community, characterized by strong interpersonal relationships and tradition-based regulation of behavior) and *gesellschaft* (i.e., complex urban life or society, characterized by estranged relationships and rules-based regulation of behavior).

Among the first academics to focus on community was philosopher Josiah Royce (1908, 1913, 1916), who celebrated the democratic ideal of a plurality of diverse people who maintained their individuality but engaged in a common cause of creating a "Great Community." Royce defined loyalty as devotion to one's community. He contended happiness could be achieved by individuals and social groups if they identified with the common will of the community (Rawlins & Stoker, 2001; Stoker & Rawlins, n.d.).

Community-as-a-locality also provided the basis for much of the early research in American sociology, notably the work of sociologists at the University of Chicago from the 1890s through the 1930s. Burgess, Park, Quandt, and others focused on the community theme (e.g., Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988). Burgess (1973) contended that an individual might belong to many social groups, but could not belong to more than one geographic community. Park and his colleagues (Park, 1952; Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, 1925/1967) pioneered ethnographic field work in the neighborhoods of Chicago and conceptualized a community as the aggregation of people as well as the various social institutions (e.g., churches, social service agencies, and media) that allowed neighborhoods to operate as self-contained villages within larger urban settings.

Even though geographic and structural approaches to community have practical value, later scholars found the Chicago School's approach theoretically inadequate. Subsequent community research steadily has shifted away from a geographic focus to emphasize cultural aspects. Stacey (1974; see also Carey, 1989) summed up the difficulty of any territorially based definition, short of a global one, by noting spatial boundaries have been eliminated through communications and transportation.

Symbolic Communities. Cohen (1985) called for the antithesis of the geographic-based definition of community when he suggested that all communities are symbolic and socially constructed. Drawing on constructionist ideas that provide for multiple social realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), Cohen argued that a community exists exclusively in people's minds and is rooted in its symbolic constituents, without regard to place. Just as arterial roads often define the perimeter of a neighborhood, psychic boundaries exist that represent the lines of demarcation for a community. Cohen suggested these socially constructed boundaries enclose elements considered to be more like one another than they are different. He observed:

Community . . . is a boundary-expressing symbol. As a symbol, it is held in common by its members, but its meaning varies with its members' unique orientations to it. In the face of this variability of meaning, community has to be kept alive through the manipulation of symbols. The reality and efficacy of the community's boundary—and therefore, of the community itself—depends on its symbolic construction and embellishment. (p. 15)

In order to understand community, Cohen stressed the necessity of capturing the experiences of its members. If the members of a community come to feel they have less in common with one another than they do with members of another community, the integrity of the community becomes impugned.

Various other sociologists following the demise of the Chicago School have placed increased emphasis on the cultural dimensions of community. Hillery (1955), in a classic literature review, suggested that community, in fact, involves a territorial variable (place), a sociological variable (social interaction), and a psychocultural variable (a commonality of ties). Later, Effrat (1974) suggested three slightly different categories of community: as solidarity institutions, as a form of primary interaction, and as institutionally distinct groups. Bell and Newby (1974) identified a broader list of elements present in most definitions of community: social interaction based on geographic area, self-sufficiency, common life, consciousness of a kind, and possession of common ends, norms, and means. Minar and Greer (1969) suggested that communities "express our vague yearnings for a commonality of desire, a commune with those around us, an extension of the bond of kin and friendship to all of those who share a common fate" (p. xi). Poplin (1972) focused on such groups as *moral communities*, which he suggested incorporated a sense of identification, a commonality of goals, involvement, and wholeness.

For many cultural theorists, a key issue involves how community relates to an individual's personal identity (Byker & Anderson, 1975; Cheney, 1991; Sandel, 1982). MacIntyre (1981, 1988) argued that our self-identities are intertwined with our membership in various communities. Indeed, understanding social reality can be achieved only within socially embedded traditions of thought through shared practices (e.g., Leeper & Leeper, 2001). MacIntyre's ideas are consistent with Carey's (1989) call for a ritualistic model of communication.

As suggested here, defining community in symbolic terms shifts the paradigm from a primarily structural-functional approach to primarily a cultural perspective. This approach to community is not altogether new, but can be traced back to Durkheim's (1893/1933) distinction between *mechanical solidarity* and *organic community*. For further discussion of the symbolic nature of communities, see Anderson (1991) and Hunter (1972).

A careful reading of Chicago School writers suggests the importance of culture. Burgess (1973) pointed out that an individual is not a member of a community because he or she lives in it, but to the extent that she or he participates in the common life of the community. Park (1938) emphasized the cultural ties that bind a community and how people participate in a common memory. He wrote: "[C]ommunal society rises out of the need of individuals to survive as individuals because they are important to one another" (p. 94), compared to the family, which thrives primarily to preserve the species (e.g., Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Park, Burgess, & McKenzie, 1925/1967). Similarly, Dewey (1927), an early member of the Chicago School, emphasized that communal life was moral, which he defined as being sustained emotionally, intellectually, and consciously.

PERVASIVENESS OF THE COMMUNITY IDEA AND IDEAL

This essay began by suggesting four bases upon which community might serve as a superior construct for public relations theory/practice. The first argument centers on the pervasiveness of the community concept.

Pragmatically, as a concept for the practice of public relations, community links the field to an idea and an ideal that is widely and positively accepted in the everyday world. Community strikes a resonating chord among many individuals, particularly contrasted with sterile alternatives such as market, publics, or audiences. Many people want to feel they are part of a community. Similarly, the community construct has received increased attention from scholars in recent years, which allows public relations scholars to integrate their research with other threads of contemporary research in the social sciences and humanities.

Community as a Theme in American Culture

Central to the issue of community is the tension between the ideals of individualism and collectivity that characterize much of Western (and especially American)

thought. As a people, Americans cherish individual freedom, but at the same time yearn to be part of something larger. Bellah and his colleagues (1985) cogently sum up this struggle in their seminal study on American individualism and commitment:

[I]f the language of the self-reliant individual is the first language of American moral life, the languages of tradition and commitment to communities . . . are the "second languages" that most Americans know as well, which they use when the language of the radically separate self does not seem adequate. (p. 154)

Peck, founder of the Foundation for Community Encouragement, a consulting firm in Ridgefield, CT, popularized the idea of community building during the 1990s in two popular, best-selling books (1987, 1993). Peck defined a community as a

group of two or more people who have been able to accept and transcend their differences regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds (social, spiritual, educational, ethnic, economic, political, etc.). This allows them to communicate effectively and openly and to work together toward goals identified as being for their common good. (Foundation for Community Encouragement, n.d., p. 1)

Peck launched a broader community movement in the U.S. in which Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) and Whitmayer (1993) stressed many of the same ideas. Gardner (1996) argued that the feeling of being a part of a community is integral to individualism; the loss of a community sense can be evidenced in a loss of meaning, a sense of powerlessness, and the diminution of individual responsibility and commitment (Community = relationships, 1997). A more narrowly focused approach was the *communitarian* movement, which called for a new social and public order based upon a society composed of small, cooperative, partially collectivized communities. Communitarian Etzioni (1991, 1993) invoked an "I and We" paradigm to suggest that both individualism and community have a basic moral standing in American society; neither is secondary nor derivative. The "I" stands for the individual while the "We" signifies the social, cultural, political, and historical forces that shape the collective factor—the community (1991, p. 137).

Community thus is robust idea, which Day and Murdoch (1993) explained "just will not lay down" (p. 83). Nisbet (1953) has argued that Americans remain on a "quest for community" and that the problem of community lost and community regained is "the towering moral problems of the age" (p. 27). Naisbitt (1982) pointed to community involvement, within the broader framework of the self-help movement, as a major megatrend of 1980s (see also Toch, 1965). More recently, Naisbitt and Aburdene (1990) suggested that the 1990s heralded the demise of institutions and the triumph of the individual. Individuals, however, do not remain alone, they contend: "Stripped down to the individual, one can build community, the free association of individuals" (p. 324).

The community theme continues as a dominant part of America's political and social rhetoric. The first recorded reference can be traced to Winthrop's imploring of Pilgrim settlers to work together while en route to the New World aboard the *Arbella* in 1630 (Wilson, 1968, p. 1). Today, the same message is heard in everyday political rhetoric (Clinton, 1996; Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993).

Community as a Scholarly Interest

Brenkman (1992) traced the rise of individualism, and the corresponding decline of community, as concepts addressed by intellectuals during the late 18th and 19th centuries. He observed that the decline in interest in community corresponded with the rise of capital markets, the polis (i.e., nation-state), and the family—the institutions that captured the attention of Hegel and Marx, and later Freud. Chatterjee (1990) explained that community was a premodern concept and argued that the “narrative of community” was systematically absorbed into other institutions. This transformation occurred at the same time that the idea of the mass society evolved (Williams, 1967).

Early 19th century American letters similarly focused on the virtues of individualism, witnessed by the writings of such authors as Emerson, Garrison, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and others. Wilson (1968) contended that, after the American Civil War, there was an almost wholesale rejection of the transcendental individual in favor of an emphasis on the idea of community and related topics, such as politics, intellectual inquiry, morality, nature, and genetics (Quandt, 1970).

As an intellectual idea today, community crosses a broad spectrum of American and European thought. The concept continues to interest researchers in the modern tradition. Interest in the idea also has been boosted by postmodernism, religious existentialism, neo-Marxism, post-Freudian psychotherapy, sociological interactionism, and poststructuralism. The community concept flourishes as topics of intellectual interest in such broad areas as history (Calhoun, 1980; Wuthnow, 1989), philosophy (King, 2001; Moon, 1993; Plant, 1974), political science (Anderson, 1991; Wolfe, 1970), consumer behavior (Fischer & Gainer, 1995; Gainer & Fischer, 1994; Prensky & Wright-Isak, 1997; Thompson & Holt, 1996), business ethics (Post, 2000), and urban studies (Little, 2000; McKnight, 1994).

In speech communication, *speech community* is used to describe groups and their boundaries in ethnographic and cross-cultural studies (Hymes, 1974). Duncan (1962/1985) referred to symbolization as taking the form of community or social dramas, and Gadamer (1975/1989, p. 446) described communication, which he defined as the coming to an understanding, as “the life process through which a community of life is lived out” and that “[a]ll kinds of human community life are forms of linguistic community.” Goffman (1959) used the same community-based drama motif. Hardt (1975) equated communication as both a theory and method of community. Most recently, Ball-Rokeach, Kim, and Matei (2001) have sparked new interest in interpersonal ties and the creation of the *storytelling neighborhood*.

Organizational theorists and organizational communication researchers have similarly embraced the notion of community in a broad range of contexts, including *learning communities* (Gozdz, 2000), *moral communities* (Milley, 2002), and *workforce communities* (Cairncross, 2002). Boone (2001) identified five kinds of communities that can be found within the modern organization. These are communities of practice, purpose, interest, learning, and support.

Ouchi (1979) referred to *clans* within organizations and industries and stressed the importance of traditions, shared values and beliefs, and trust. What were once considered differences in management styles between organizations are more commonly attributed to differences in organizational cultures (Harris, 1990; Pepper, 1995). The introduction of new technologies, in particular, heightened interest in the community metaphor among organizations (Beamish, 2001; Gattiker, 2001; Komito, 1998; Wasko & Faraj 2000; Wasko & Mosco, 1992). Organizational communities have been conceptualized in terms of *alliances* and *cooperative communities* (Tapscott, Ticoll, & Lowy, 2000), *networked economies* (Liebowitz, 2002), and *integrated networks* (Contractor & Eisenberg, 1990; Hampton & Wellman, 2001; Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia, & Haythornthwaite, 1996). Technology has restructured organizational forms and functions (DeSanctis & Fulk, 1999; Fulk & Steinfield, 1990) and formed the basis for the *knowledge management* function in organizations (Shand, 1999). Meanwhile, organizational communicators have acknowledged the importance of *community meaning* as a foundation for organizational narratives (Kelly & Zak, 1999).

In mass communication, researchers have recognized the value of research conducted at the community level. This research tradition can trace its roots to Park, and has focused principally on the role of media in creating community ties and measurement of community involvement (e.g., Barlow, 1988; Bogart & Orenstein, 1965; Carter & Clarke, 1963; Christians & Hammond, 1986; Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978; Edelstein & Larson, 1960; Finnegan & Viswanath, 1988; Friedland, 2001; Haring, 1972; Jankowski, 1982; Janowitz, 1952; Jeffres & Dobos, 1988; Jeffres, Dobos, & Lee, 1988; Jeffres, Dobos, & Sweeney, 1987; McLeod et al., 2000; Overduin, 1986; Rothenbuhler, 1991; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Stamm, 1985, 1988, 2001; Stamm & Fortini-Campbell, 1983; Stamm & Guest, 1991; Stamm & Weis, 1986; Steiner, 1988; Stone, 1977; Viswanath, Finnegan, Rooney, & Potter, 1990). Other research has focused on the role of media in community conflict (Olien, Donohue & Tichenor, 1984; Tichenor, Donohue, & Olien, 1980) and the consequences of *community knowledge gaps* (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1986; Gaziano, 1988; Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970; Viswanath, Kosicki, Park, & Fredin, 1993). Most recently, the *civic or public journalism movement* focused on community in examining news practices and processing (Albers, 1994; Anderson, Dardenne & Killenberg, 1994; Gibbs, 1994; Merritt, 1995; Merritt & Rosen, 1995; Rosen & Merritt, 1994; Schudson, 1978).

The increased emphasis on community has been spurred on by the continuing growth of cultural and critical studies, in which community plays a central role in

theory development by emphasizing dependency and relationships using macro- and meso-level approaches. The primary means by which community has been employed by cultural studies scholars has been through the idea of *interpretive communities* to describe groups of audiences that develop their own meanings for what is read, viewed, or heard (Cheney, 1982; Fish, 1980; Fontain, 1988; Frenz & Rushkin, 1999; Hebdige, 1979; Lindlof, 1988; Lindlof & Meyer, 1987; Littlejohn, 2002; Nightengale, 1986; Radway, 1984; Steiner, 1988). One study, for example, identified the local bookstore as a vital institution around which people search for community (Miller, 1999).

The community concept has also been a focal point for writers concerned with the deleterious consequences of technology on social relationships (Gergen, 1991; Kirby, 1989; Meyerowitz, 1985a, 1985b; Mosco, 1998; Phelan, 1988). The literature is replete with community-related references, such as *global village* (McLuhan, 1964), *smart communities* (Jung 1998), *switched-on communities* (Williams, 1982), *telecommunity* (Toffler, 1971, 1982), *pseudocommunity* (Beniger, 1987), and *virtual community* (Hegel & Armstrong, 1997; "Information highway," 1994; Jones, 1995; Quarterman, 1993; Rheingold, 1993; Schwartz, 1995; Watson, 1997; Wright, 1998, 2001). Technology has been both lauded for making possible community information services (Slack & Williams, 2000) and criticized for transforming societal processes and social structure (Calabrese, 1991, 2001; Grossman, 2001), for the disruption of political unity and structures (Carey, 1998; Shaw & Hamm, 1997), and for the creation of a "digital divide" (Logos & Jung, 2001).

Critical scholars invoke community when calling for needed changes in the power relationships in society (e.g., Ashcraft, 2001; Vrooman, 2002). Drawing on writers such as Foucault (1980), who argued that culture emerges out of a struggle between desire and power, the agendas of feminist and neo-Marxist scholars seek to establish new forms of community as alternatives to extant bureaucracies in society (Davis & Puckett, 1992). Central to this critical approach to community are the ideas of solidarity and empowerment created by alternative discourses (Haber, 1994) that can lead to unity or fragmentation (Hogan, 1998). Community particularly resonates with activists representing gay and lesbian, African American, Native American, feminist, and other marginalized groups in society engaged in struggles over place, identity, or political voice.

COMMUNITY AND THEORETICAL LIMITS OF THE PUBLIC CONSTRUCT

Public relations practitioners and theorists have only recently begun to address community in the nongeographic senses described above. Instead of community, the field has relied almost exclusively on the closely related concept of public as a conceptual framework in which to address public relations activities. A strong argument can be made that public is overly narrow in meaning and excessively mechanistic to be useful in today's modern practice.

The Concepts of Public Versus Community

The origins of the public concept can be traced to the mid-18th century when courtiers to Louis XV and Louis XVI were dispatched to listen to the thoughts of successful businessmen and influential political leaders in the salons of Paris (Herbst & Beniger, 1994). Ironically, this original use of the term public actually meant the small and closely knit community composed of France's elites. More recently, the term public regained attention in the 1920s with the recognition of the importance of public opinion (Lippmann, 1922, 1925) and the concomitant emergence of public relations (Bernays, 1923).

When used in the context of public opinion, public connotes the general public or the population of an entire nation-state or other political unit. This provided the context in which Bernays (1923) coined the term *public relations counsel*. Importantly, conceptualizations of public and public opinion have changed significantly over time (Herbst, 1995; Herbst & Beniger, 1995; Peters, 1995). Participation in public life (which was then distinct from the realm of one's private life) was considered a cornerstone of citizenship in ancient Greece (Arendt, 1998). That democratic ideal was carried forward into the 18th century with the idea that the middle class was engaged in a robust discussion of citizen concerns. Habermas (1962/1989) described this arena or network of discussion as the *bourgeois public sphere*, situated between what he termed the *private realm* and *sphere of public authority* in society. People came together in this public sphere "to engage in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor" (p. 27). These streams of conversation then coalesced into public opinion. Habermas lamented that the nature and quality of the debates once carried out in towns, clubs, and newspapers have been irreversibly transformed with the advent of mass media, particularly with the rise of modern advertising and public relations. His argument paralleled Lippmann's (1925) contention that the people have disengaged from public discussion and provided the basis for what Mayhew (1997) termed the new public, where professional communication specialties dominate discourse and thus undermine the ties between citizens. As described by Habermas, the very existence and dimensions of this robust arena of discussion have been challenged by scholars (e.g., Robbins, 1995; Woodward, 1975).

From an organizational perspective, public can be generalized to mean all persons not directly associated with an organization. This is the reflective approach of European public relations theorists and practitioners who are more public oriented in their approach to the public relations practice than their organization-oriented American counterparts (Ruler, Vercic, Bütschi, & Flodin, 2000). European theorists have special concern for the implications of organizational behavior toward and in the public sphere. Ruler & Vercic (2002a, p. 4), for example, cited Ronneberger & Röhl's (1992) argument that public relations is to be measured by the quality and quantity of the public sphere it coproduces through its activities, particularly those that contribute to the free flow of information. Similarly,

participation in the public sphere highlights the use of legitimacy and legitimization as one of the central concepts in European public relations (e.g., Jensen, 1997). In part, this can be traced to the strong European commitment to the ethical principle of publicness that can be traced to Kant (1795/1983; Spichal, 1999).

The limitations of addressing the entire population of a society have been recognized by theorists and practitioners alike, particularly in an era in which interest in many topics are in narrow niches of the population and audience segmentation has become widely adopted as a communication strategy. Today, public relations practitioners use public loosely as a synonym for a variety of constructs, including communities, audiences, markets, and segments. Recently, most theorizing in public relations has defined publics narrowly. Grunig & Hunt (1984), for example, suggested that a public is a “loosely structured system whose members detect the same problem or issue, interact either face-to-face or through mediated channels, and behave as though they were the one body” (p. 144). Their definition drew heavily upon philosopher John Dewey and sociologist Herbert Blumer.

Dewey (1927) defined a public as a group of people that (a) faces a similar problem, (b) recognizes the problem exists, and (c) organizes to do something about it. He explained: “Indirect, extensive, enduring and serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behavior call a public into existence having a common interest in controlling those consequences” (p. 126). Blumer (1946/1960) similarly described a public as a group of people who (a) have confronted an issue, (b) are divided in their ideas about to how to meet the issue, and (c) engage in discussion over the issue. Significantly, Blumer (1946/1960) contended that a public is a spontaneous grouping that lacks (a) prescribed traditions or cultural patterns, (b) any form of pre-established organization or fixed status roles, and (c) any “we-feeling” (pp. 46–47) or consciousness of identity among members.

From these classical sociological definitions, a public can be described narrowly as an ephemeral, limited-purpose social coalition that is created through discussion related to particular issues in which members have a self-interest. Members are willing to cooperate, to form coalitions, and to share power as long as mutual goals are served.

By contrast, community is broader concept. A community can be defined as any group that shares common interests developed through common experience. Table 1 contrasts key differences between a public and a community.

Unlike a public, a community is not organized around a specific issue and need not constitute itself through direct issue-specific discussion (Mason, 1993). A community can be a pre-existing collectivity concerned with a broad range of interests. Members’ goals might be apolitical and involve nothing more than sustenance (e.g., preservation, enrichment, or enjoyment). The goal of many public relations programs, for example, is to promote products and services that people believe contribute to the quality of their lives. Organizations thus strive to relate to people as they pursue their private lives—not their public lives (Arendt, 1958/1998; Habermas (1962/1989). Even though Dewey (1927) chided such

TABLE 1
Comparison of Public and Community Concepts

	<i>Public</i>	<i>Community</i>
Focus of group	Issues	Interests
Power orientation	Generally political	Often apolitical
Goal	Change	Sustenance
History	Limited to time since organized; often ephemeral because of group's limited focus/purpose	Often long and rich because well-established
Linkages within group	Common goal; discussion about issue; activist activities	Culture (beliefs, values, ritual, traditions, artifacts, language), discursive activities, participation, shared identity
Composition	Generally considered to be organizations, composed of individuals	Individuals and institutions
Organizational recognition	Difficult to locate until group makes concerns known	Easier to locate and to become familiar with interests
Organizational involvement	Often reactive, mostly mandated or provoked by the group	Ideally proactive
Organizational communication	Continuum of responses from accommodation to advocacy; negotiation	Ingratiation (involvement, nurture, organizing)
Relationships of concepts	Most publics form out of communities.	A limited-purpose public often later evolves into a community, but the group's focus usually broadens beyond a single issue.

instinct-induced activities related to consumption and amusement as only distracting people's attention from public matters (Aronowitz, 1995), topics such as cereal, bank services, or motorcycles are relevant and worthwhile because they relate to the activities in which real-world organizations engage as producers of goods or the provider of services. When controversies arise and topics such as child nutrition, financial privacy, or highway safety enter the arena of public discussion as issues, the focus of public relations activities shifts. Then one of several public relations specialties might be employed, such as *issues management* or *community/government relations*.

A comparison of the origins of the two concepts illustrates significant differences. **The term public as used in much public relations theory today is**

grounded in political economy, systems theory, and social exchange theory. Public defines a group solely from the perspective of its relationship to a particular organization and an issue. A public is a group that must be reckoned with by the organization whose goals might be incompatible with that public. An organization's involvement with these publics is often reactive, rather than proactive. Such responses are thought to be arrayed along a continuum from pure accommodation to pure advocacy (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995) and often involve negotiation.

Community, on the other hand, embodies both social scientific and humanistic approaches and recognizes that self-identifying communities exist without regard to their relationship to any particular organization or problem. Communities can thrive based on social, cultural, and economic interests as well as general political interests unrelated to any particular problem. Importantly, members often can readily identify themselves as members of a particular community. By contrast, few people willingly identify themselves as members of a public.

As a broader concept than publics, communities are the units from which issues-based publics emerge. For a public to emerge, it is necessary for members of the community to be able to interact and to share a set of common beliefs, values, and symbols. Indeed, communities shape the factors that might influence the formation of issues-based publics. In his nested model for segmentation for information campaigns, J. Grunig (1989a) acknowledged communities as the social structure that most closely encircles a public. In turn, publics that do not dissolve following the successful resolution of a problem but often persevere by becoming a community. Notably, however, the scope of the group's interests inevitably expands.

Limitations of the Public Construct for Public Relations Practice

A closer reading of Dewey and Blumer shows that both authors recognized the importance of communities. For Dewey (1927), publics were not the ideal form of social organization for solving societal problems; in fact, he lamented the existence of too many competing publics. Dewey's goal was the transformation of society into a Great Community. Dewey later wrote that communication was, at the same time, instrumental in enabling people to live in a world with things that have meaning and final in the sense of providing for a "sharing in the objects precious to a community, sharing whereby meanings are enhanced, deepened and solidified in the sense of communion" (Dewey, 1929, p. 159; Bybee, 1999). In a similar vein, Blumer (1969) recognized the importance of a common culture, which was referred to as community by his mentor, Mead. Blumer wrote:

The participants involved in the formation of [a] new joint action always bring to that formation the world of objects, the set of meanings and the schemes of interpretation they already possess. . . . One is on treacherous and empirically invalid ground if [one] thinks that any given form of joint action can be sliced from its historical linkage, as if its makeup and character arose out of the air through spontaneous generation instead of growing out of what went before. (p. 20)

Significantly, a public need not be composed of members from a single community (J. Grunig, 1989a). Indeed, coalitions represent members of different interest groups who come together on a particular topic. As the number of different communities increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to find a common ground of understanding beyond the single subject that brings members of a public together.

From a practical viewpoint, the public construct also poses difficult problems for practitioners. First, to be conceptually consistent, the use of the term public in public relations suggests that the field is effectively limited to dealing with groups actually organized around an issue. Such is not the case. J. Grunig's (1975, 1978) typology of publics illustrates the problem when he suggests that publics can include active, aware, and latent publics, as well as nonpublics (defined as a group not potentially affected by an organization). Public relations directed to a nonpublic seems nonsensical.

Second, publics are not the only social organizations involved in the recognition of issues today. Besides the grassroots individual organizers envisioned by Dewey and Blumer, issues today are initiated by already organized special interest groups, political parties, public interest research groups, and various community development corporations (Hallahan, 2001). As Lippmann (1925) noted, citizens in modern society can easily become a phantom public that is perfectly content to turn over the resolution of problems to these experts. By comparison, the notion of community accommodates the fact that formal organizations and institutions are important threads in the fabric of society that must be recognized by organizations.

Third, a public can be the target of public relations efforts but only after the group is formed and can be located. Absent the ability to locate specific groups of active publics, many proactive public relations programs are directed, in fact, to communities of stakeholders, which can be defined as individuals who can influence or are influenced by an organization's actions. Due to their ephemeral nature, publics in the early stages of emergence are difficult to locate, whereas communities are more well-established and actually are the groups that organizations can monitor.

Finally, the field's focus on publics, as so narrowly defined, fails to provide insights about how to communicate effectively with publics because cultural understanding of the group is not addressed. J. Grunig's (1976, 1983) situational theory of publics, for example, provided useful direction for predicting the likelihood that individuals will become active in a particular situation or on particular issue (high problem recognition, high involvement, and low constraint recognition), but provides few clues for developing responses. By contrast, community clearly recognizes that groups that already exist share a culture and have already engaged in a variety of discursive activities that provide clues for how an organization might relate to them.

Alternative Theorizing About Publics

Public relations researchers have recognized the limitations in the traditional treatment of publics. In particular, they have argued that contemporary public

relations theory is strongly biased by its organization-centered, structural–functional perspective. Implicit in the traditional definition of public is the idea that an organization must strive to manage or control publics to its advantage, or at least to the mutual benefit of both the organization and the publics upon which the organization depends on for its success or failure (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1999). This organization-based focus has relegated publics to a secondary position in public relations theory (Karlberg, 1996; Leitch & Neilson, 2001; Moffitt, 1994).

Various authors have called for a reconceptualization of the publics construct. Hallahan (2000a, 2000b, 2001) has argued that not all groups to which public relations efforts are directed are necessarily focused on issues, and that too much attention has been paid to activists, despite their potential impact on organizations. He pointed to the importance of *inactive publics*, which comprise the majority of the public at large. He defined inactive publics as people with low knowledge and low involvement in a particular topic (Hallahan, 1999a). Inactive publics are somewhat akin to what Blumer (1960/1946) termed a *mass*, but often take on characteristics of a community.

Moffitt (1994, 2001) called for replacement of the term public altogether with a segmentation scheme that focused on *public positions*. Her collapse model of corporate image identified from the larger population particular opinions, attitudes, or behaviors that are shared by all members across the entire population. The concept of publics as segments of people is replaced with a more precise and detailed view of public positions as shared knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors within a population (community).

Other writers have sought to shift the definition of a public from a structural-functional management perspective to a communication-based perspective. For example, Vasquez (1994) argued that organization-public relationships are better defined as linkages between an organization and publics. Drawing upon Borman's symbolic convergence theory, Vasquez contended that a public might be defined as individuals who have created, raised, and sustained a group consciousness around a situation where each person participated in creating a shared symbolic reality. Later Vasquez and Taylor (2001) identified Vasquez's *homo narrans* perspective as one of four alternative conceptualizations of public. Other perspectives were based on theories of mass society, situational issues, and agenda-building. Vasquez's emphasis on symbolic reality closely aligns with rhetorical theories about interpretive communities.

Leitch and Neilson (2001) similarly attempted to redefine the notion of a public and called for a publics-centered approach to public relations. Drawing upon Habermas (1962/1989), they distinguished between the public and private domains and between *system organizations* and *lifeworld organizations*. A system organization operates according to the logic of strategic or instrumental rationality. Examples include corporations created to generate profits. By contrast, a lifeworld organization is rooted in communicative action, such as a grassroots social movement. Similarly, the relationships between publics and these two types of organizations differ based upon competing discourses and the differential access to power

enjoyed by these organizations. The objective of public relations in a traditional system organization is to maximize public support or minimize objections to organizational actions. By contrast, relationships between lifeworld organizations and publics are often more reflexive and complementary. Leitch and Neilsen defined a public in terms that are strikingly similar to that of a community: a group of people who develop their own identities and representations of their collective interests. People play multiple roles as members of multiple publics, but these roles are sometimes conflicting and require individuals to negotiate their own identities and priorities (e.g., Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

Chay-Nemeth (2001) argued for an alternative conceptualization of publics as a political space or site in which material resources and discourses are appropriated and exchanged among participants to effect social and political change or to maintain the status quo. In an archaeological study of participants in the HIV/AIDS debate in Thailand, the author framed a typology of participants whom she identified as circumscribed, co-opted, critical, and circumventing publics. In order to understand fully a public, she argued that it is necessary to understand the level of a public's resource dependency, discursive connectivity, and legitimacy.

Jones (2002) also called for the reconceptualization of publics and opined that the rise of a risk-based society had led to the emergence of new communicatively powerful publics and the movement of politics into subpolitical arenas dominated by activists and NGOs (nongovernment organizations). Jones observed:

Current conceptualisations of public within public relations remain remarkably simplistic and reflect the managerial and normative traditional prevalent in the discipline. Most notably they tend to impose a rational-managerial logic onto publics. This neglects to consider the internal dynamics of public[s] by assuming that they are composed of information-processing individuals who react to organisationally defined issues, and fails to incorporate the idea that publics might form without organizational action. (p. 50)

Jones defined the presence of two or more publics as a community. He noted, "These communities are built and sustained through issue-based discourse" (p. 50). He contended that public relations thus is fundamentally involved in the exchange of identities and in shared discourse and meanings. Jones argued that publics converge around a common way of communicating and that "[p]ublics form communities of shared meaning, where issues become the interest" (p. 56).

Finally, Botan (1993a) drew upon the rhetorical approach to community when he suggested that "public relations addresses its communications to . . . interpretive communities, which we call publics" (p. 73). Botan and Soto (1998) also challenged the prevailing view that publics are entities created in reaction to problems or issues. Following the linguistic tradition of Charles Peirce (versus Ferdinand Saussure), and incorporating ideas of Bormann and Eco, Botan and Soto argued that publics ought to be understood primarily as self-actuated and interactive social entities with complex values and internal dynamics who interpret and share

the meanings of signs. The interpretations are virtually endless (unlimited semiosis) and contextual. Importantly, publics are created through a chain of interpretations that occur in a community. Whereas Vasquez (1994) stated that a public is composed of “individuals who have created, raised, and sustained a group consciousness around the problematic event or issue” (p. 271) in the past, Botan and Soto (1998) contended that a public should be conceived as “ongoing process of agreement upon an interpretation” (p. 38). As a result, there is no point in time in which the public is finally or definitely constituted.

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that the field’s traditional conceptualization of public is under challenge. To define public as all of the citizens within a society is of marginal value to organizations because relatively few organizations or topics are truly of broad interest to all citizens. This effectively limits the utility of conceptualizing public relations as being engaged in discussion in a single public sphere. Although researchers such as J. Grunig (1983; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) have focused on public as a group organized around an issue (created out of discussions about a problem), many public relations efforts are directed toward audiences, stakeholders, or constituencies for whom no problem exists. A simple commonality of interests suffices.

The term community provides a potentially useful alternative. A community can be any subset of a society or social system (and in limited circumstances, the whole society) in which members are drawn together by common interests. More importantly, those common interests are constituted in common symbols (Cohen, 1985), common discursive activities, and common identities (Botan, 1993a; Jones 2002). A community provides the arena in which people communicate. Unlike an ephemeral public that emerges around a particular issue and then dissolves, a community can be located, and its interests, values, history, power, and political structure understood.

EMERGING COMMUNITY-RELATED THEORIES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

For more than a decade, public relations theorists have been engaged in a paradigm struggle both to define the practice and find alternative ways to study public relations. Kuhn (1970) popularized the concept when he defined a paradigm as a collection of beliefs shared by scientists about how problems are to be understood and studied. Toth and Heath (1992) defined the paradigm struggle in public relations as pitting traditional organization-centered research that draws upon systems theory against alternative perspectives that use rhetorical theory and critical theory. This struggle is reflected in the alternative approaches to the public construct outlined in the previous section. The debate has been carried forward in other calls for new directions for public relations theory (Botan, 1993b; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996).

Public Relations and Restoration of Community

Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) are credited as being the first to argue that public relations ought to be conceptualized as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community. The Iowa researchers drew heavily upon theorizing by members of the Chicago School of Social Thought. Despite criticisms that their argument sought to return to a romanticized (perhaps nonexistent) past and failed to cohere theoretically or practically (e.g., Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 174), the authors have sustained their argument through the years (Kruckeberg, 1998a, 1998b). They argue that the problem is even more urgent today because of the institutional power of corporations (Kruckeberg, 2001; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001).

Kruckeberg & Starck (1988) contended that a community emphasis in public relations places a premium on a caring attitude toward others:

It is a humane and altruistic function, but one based on sound and pragmatic philosophy. It is a role, to a very great extent, of nonmanipulation. Too, it is a role that, if practiced as espoused here, should result in a more human and mutually supportive society. (p. 117)

Kruckeberg and Starck (1988; Kruckeberg, 1998a) outlined their vision of a community-oriented practice as one in which public relations practitioners do eight things: (a) make community members conscious of their common interests, (b) overcome alienation, (c) use technology to create community in the same way Dewey called for the use of schools, (d) promote leisure-time activities, (e) engage in consummatory (self-fulfilling) communication that can be enjoyed for its own sake, (f) lead in charitable works, (g) help communities share aesthetic experience, religious ideas, personal values, and sentiments, and (h) foster personal relationships.

Other public relations scholars have offered similar support for the community concept. The two most explicit arguments involve *strategic cooperative communities* and *communitarianism*.

Strategic Cooperative Communities

Wilson (1994, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002; Wilson & McNiven, 2001, Wilson & Stoker, 2000) followed Kruckeberg and Starck by arguing that positive community relations is a means for corporations to foster positive relationships. Wilson's notion of strategic cooperative communities suggests that an organization's core values in such efforts should focus on the importance of people, safety, health and the environment, service and participation (care, concern, and loyalty), and respect.

Wilson (1996) argued that building community requires corporations to possess five characteristics: (a) long-range vision, (b) a sincere commitment to community service, not just profit, (c) organizational values that emphasize the importance of people (including trust, respect, and human dignity), (d) cooperative problem

solving and empowerment, and (e) a relationship-building approach to public relations. Wilson rejected notions of social responsibility that are justified based upon bottom-line, economic benefits. Instead, Wilson (1994) argued that community must be based on genuine cooperation. Social responsibility ought better to be understood under a communitarian framework that emphasizes “the interdependent relationship and role of business as a participant in [communities] that consist of a variety of actors, individual and organizational, all cooperating for a common good that extends far beyond solely financial factors” (Wilson, 2001, p. 522).

Such an approach would reject the exploitation identified in some corporate community relations programs. Rawlins and Stoker, two of Wilson’s colleagues, departed from Kruckeberg and Stark (1988) and drew upon the philosophy of Royce (1916) to argue that organizations have contributed to the loss of community by becoming detached through callous exploitation of communities. They argued genuine community requires organizations to (a) adopt ideal ends that connect to the values and ideals of the community, (b) seek moral attachment to the community by enabling neighbors and organizational members to achieve the ideals and purposes inherent in the genuine community, (c) promote autonomy and independence among community members, and (d) show loyalty to the community and be willing to sacrifice self-interests to promote the ideals and values of the community (Rawlins & Stoker, 2001; Stoker & Rawlins, n.d.).

Communitarianism

Theorists other than Wilson have pointed to communitarianism (Etzioni, 1991, 1993) as a potentially useful ethical framework for public relations. K. Leeper (1996) focused on the issues of quality, social responsibility, and stewardship. Leeper cited the cases of the Tylenol recall in 1982 and the Exxon Valdez mishap in 1989 as contrasting examples of exercising and not exercising communitarian ethics.

Culbertson and Chen (1997) similarly outlined six tenets of communitarianism pertinent to public relations (*italics in original*):

1. Whether a behavior is right or wrong depends in large part on its positive contribution to *commitment to* and *quality of relationships*.
2. Community requires a sense of interconnectedness and *social cohesion*.
3. Identification of—and humble but firm commitment to—*core values and beliefs are essential* to a sense of community.
4. People who claim *rights* must be willing to balance them with *responsibility*.
5. Community requires that all citizens have a feeling of *empowerment*—of involvement in making and implementing decisions that bear on their lives.
6. Community requires a *broadening of one’s social world*—one’s array of significant others—so as to reduce fragmentation and enhance breadth of perspective.

R. Leeper (2001) extended the argument to suggest that communitarianism, as a particular community-based approach, could serve as a metatheory for the practice of public relations in the context of research about practitioners’ role and communication symmetry (see next section). Communitarianism, he said, also has

implications for publics, corporate social responsibility, and ethics. Later, Leeper and Leeper (2001) argued that the development of community might stand as the end goal for public relations if the field is to be considered a professional practice as outlined by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre.

Even though these three threads of theory explicitly term community as a foundation for public relations theory and research, a wider range of other recent theorizing draws heavily upon closely related concepts.

Symmetric, Dialogic, and Transactional Approaches to Community

Public relations has been characterized for decades as using information or persuasion to influence people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions (Miller, 1989). Such influence efforts are still legitimate and remain an integral part of public relations practice today; however, public relations theorists have recognized that public relations provides a conduit through which communication exchanges can and should occur between an organization and others.

J. Grunig (1976, 1992, 2001; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & D. Dozier, 2002) proposed one of the most widely researched and debated models in public relations when he suggested that public relations can be practiced alternatively or in combination as press agency, public information, two-way asymmetric communication (scientific persuasion), or two-way symmetrical communication. J. Grunig and colleagues argued that public relations is ideally practiced as two-way symmetrical communication in which organizations and publics are equally engaged and equally empowered to exchange ideas, and organizations are willingly responsive to the needs, concerns, and interests of others. J. Grunig and his colleagues do not explicitly state that two-way symmetrical communication is an effort to foster community; however, other researchers believe that is the case. Karlberg (1996) wrote, "By reformulating public relations as an ethical and effective force for resolving conflict and enhancing community, J. Grunig and his colleagues have provided a new theoretical framework within which public relations research can be reshaped and redirected" (p. 271).

As an alternative to communication symmetry, several theorists have invoked notions of dialogue—a foundational concept in community—as a potential basis for public relations theory. Pearson (1989a, 1989b) argued dialogue and reciprocity were central to public relations ethics and outlined rules for engaging in ethical dialogue. van Es and Meijlink (2000) point to Pearson as well as White and Mazur (1993) as illustrations of a distinct dialogic turn in direction in theorizing about public relations ethics, compared to pragmatic ethics. Kersten (1994), however, argued to make the assumption that symmetric communication is more ethical is both unrealistic and potentially dangerous because of the inherent imbalance in power relationships between organizations and individuals.

Botan (1993a, 1997) similarly advocated for dialogue in his efforts to redefine publics and argued that dialogue effectively elevates publics to the level of an organization (Leicht & Neilson, 2001). Kent and Taylor (1998) drew heavily upon

Botan to contend that dialogue is a product, rather than process, that stems out of relationships. Later Kent and Taylor (2002) identified five overarching tenets of dialogism: mutuality (collaboration, spirit of equality), propinquity (immediacy of presence, temporal flow, engagement), empathy (supportiveness, communal orientation, confirmation), relational risk (vulnerability, unanticipated consequences, strange otherness), and commitment (genuineness, commitment to conversation, commitment to interpretation). Of the requisite communal orientation, the authors argued: "Dialogue presupposes a communal orientation among interactants, whether they are individuals, organizations or publics" (p. 27). Importantly, these ideals apply to both interpersonal and mediated communication, and are particularly applicable to Web communications (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001).

Woodward (1996, 2000) argued that the symmetrical communication model's emphasis on dialogue fits within a broader transactional model of communication. Drawing on Dewey, as well as the notion of community building, Woodward (2000) asserted that the transactional philosophy is more comprehensive than mere balance or the bidirectionality of communication between entities. Instead of dyadic processes of cause and effect or the linear flows of information, the transactional view is triadic and focuses on the encompassing medium or milieu as a third element of all communication. Using language that is striking similar to the ritualistic model of communication (Carey, 1989), Woodward (2000) explained:

Dyadic, sender-receiver models emphasize transmissions and their effects, whereas the triadic transactional view draws attention to how shared worlds of knowledge are created. Successful communicators collaborate in shaping communicative environments based on mutuality; the aim is to contribute language, values and experiences that that partners can share. (p. 258)

Indeed, the transactional perspective recognizes communities as the milieu in which communication takes place.

Community-related Orientations as Professional Values

In 1999, a panel at the International Communication Association's annual conference examined the core values of public relations for the new millennium. In that session, J. Grunig (2000) cited collectivism, societal corporatism, and collaboration as core professional values—all of which resonate with the notion of community. J. Grunig maintained that organizations should promote the value of collectivism despite the fact that many organizations and the cultures in which they operate are fiercely individualistic. He also argued that the practice should help build democracy based on societal corporatism, where government (and other organizations) openly and publicly build collaborative relationships with special interest groups they affect or are affected by. Societal corporatism differs from pure corporatism, which limits access to government and other entities only to others with close-knit relations. Societal corporatism also can be contrasted with pluralism,

which encourages open, fierce competition. J. Grunig suggested that true community and his principles of public relations Excellence are more likely to develop in a societal corporatism system (J. Grunig, personal communication, October 24, 2002).

J. Grunig's (1989b) notions about collaboration built on his earlier theorizing contrasting asymmetric with symmetric worldviews. He identified seven presuppositions that made up an asymmetrical worldview among practitioners and organizations: internal orientation, closed systems, an emphasis on efficiency and control, conservatism, tradition, and central authority. By contrast he identified these characteristics of a symmetrical worldview: interdependence, open system, moving equilibrium, equity, autonomy, innovation, decentralization, responsibility, conflict resolution, and interest group liberalism (Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998). A symmetric worldview clearly is consistent with a community perspective.

Relationship Building

A recent major avenue for public relations theorizing has called for renewed emphasis on identifying the antecedents, processes, and consequences of organizational-public relationships (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; J. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Drawing on a proposition by Ferguson (1984), J. Grunig spearheaded research involving five organizations that focused on identifying and analyzing six benchmark measures of relationship quality (Hon & Grunig, 1999; J. Grunig & Huang, 2000). These measures included trustworthiness, commitment, satisfaction, control mutuality, exchange relationships, and communal relationships.

J. Grunig and colleagues adapted theorizing by Clark and Mills (1993) to suggest that public relations strives to create communal relationships versus mere exchange relationships. Hon and Grunig (1999) explained:

In a communal relationship, both parties provide benefits to the others because they are concerned about the welfare of the other—even when they get nothing in return. The role of public relations is to convince management that it also needs communal relationships . . . as well as exchange relationships with customers. (p. 22)

Hon and Grunig created a 7-item scale for measuring communal relationships.

1. *This organization does not especially enjoy giving others aid. (Reversed)
2. *This organization is very concerned with the welfare of people like me.
3. *I feel that this organization takes advantage of people who are vulnerable. (Reversed)
4. *I think that this organization succeeds by stepping on other people. (Reversed)
5. **This organization helps people like me without expecting anything in return.
6. I don't consider this is to be a particularly helpful organization. (Reversed)
7. I feel that this organization tries to get the upper hand. (Reversed)

* Items in four-item shortened scale (Cronbach's alpha = .80) **Item added in a five-item scale (Cronbach's alpha = .83). For seven-item scale, Cronbach's alpha = .86. (Hon & Grunig, 1999, pp. 30, 40).

Importantly, communal relationships are not altogether altruistic; the authors argued that individuals have been shown to achieve greater outcomes in communal relationships with families, friends, and acquaintances. They described the existence of a communal relationship as the “purest indicator” of success in relationship building (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 22).

Separately, Ledingham and Bruning (1998, 2000, 2001; Bruning, 2002) launched a research agenda to measure organization-public relationships among both consumers and citizens. From a list of 17 potential dimensions, they distilled five dimensions of a relationship that were particularly good predictors for future relationships (i.e., whether people intended to stay in or to leave a relationship). Their findings were consistent among banking customers, telephone company customers, and citizens in a small community: The presence of a felt relationship was important for retention. Four of the items they used examined individuals’ perceptions of organizations in the context of the community:

Trust: I feel I can trust (company name) to do what it says it will do.

Investment: (Company name) is the kind of company that invests in the community.

Commitment: I think (company name) is committed to making my community a better place to live.

Involvement: I am aware (company name) is involved in my community.

Openness: (Company name) shares its plans for the future with the company.

Critical and Postmodern Views of Public Relations

Researchers similarly have posed broader questions about who practices public relations and how it is practiced. This trend has brought renewed interest in the community actors engaged in public relations activities as well as the role of the professional practitioner as a community representative.

Karlberg (1996) argued that public relations research has placed too much emphasis on instrumental or administrative studies and ignored critical investigations. He contended that even research that emphasized community and communications symmetry viewed public relations as an instrument of commerce or of the state. He called for greater attention to how citizens and public interest groups engage in public relations initiatives—and the problems and limitations that confront them in doing so. Dozier and Lauzen (2000) picked up on Karlberg’s contention and called for a redefinition of the intellectual domain of public relations research, particularly to study activism as an important part of the public relations process. Along these same lines, in outlining an integrative model of issues dynamics, Hallahan (2001) suggested that understanding issues activation was just as important as examining organizational responses.

Holtzhausen (2000, 2002; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) similarly has called for public relations researchers to recognize the biases inherent in the field’s roots in modernism, including the field’s historical complicity with capitalism. Holtzhausen used postmodern theory to argue that public relations is an organizational function fundamentally involved in change. “This understanding of public relations takes it

out of organizations and into communities and transforms public relations into a discipline of immediate and just action” (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 110). Holtzhausen contended public relations is inherently political and recast the role of the postmodern public relations practitioner as one of an organizational activist who represents the interests of both the organization and others important to an organization. She questioned many premises found in the landmark Excellence research underwritten by the International Association of Business Communicators. That 17-year project concluded—among other things—that to be effective, public relations practitioners must be aligned with the dominant coalitions within organizations (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; J. Grunig, 1992; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) argued that public relations is more than an organizational practice and ought to be examined as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon.

Cultural Perspectives

Public relations researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of culture—characteristics shared by people in a community or an organization—as an important factor in effective public relations (Banks, 1995; Elwood, 1995; L. Grunig, 1995; Heath, 1992, 1994; MacManus, 2000; Mickey, 1995; Molleda, 2001; Sriramesh, 1996; Sriramesh, J. Grunig, & Buffington, 1992; Sriramesh & White, 1992; Taylor, 2000). Culture entails the beliefs and values, rituals and traditions, and language and artifacts that effectively constitute a community.

The authors of the IABC Excellence study suggested that certain public relations principles are generic and can be applied globally; however, other researchers have pointed to important differences in the way that public relations is and ought to be practiced based upon national or regional cultures (Culbertson & Chen, 1996). Drawing upon the comparative framework outlined by Hofstede (1984, 1991), for example, Sriramesh & White (1992) suggested that adherence to Excellence principles is more likely in cultures characterized by low levels of individualism, low power distance relationships, low masculinity, and low uncertainty avoidance. Huang (2000, 2001) similarly pointed out that many of the assumptions underlying public relations in the West are based on individualism, whereas different assumptions based on collectivism must be applied in the Far East. Leichty and Warner (2001) similarly argued that at least five different cultural biases can predominate the discussion of values in a society: fatalism, egalitarianism, hierarchy, autonomous individualism, and competitive individualism. These topoi must be considered depending upon the community.

Organizational cultures and communities also have been recognized as important variables that can influence public relations practice (MacManus, 2000; Sriramesh, J. Grunig, & Buffington, 1992). Sriramesh, J. Grunig, & Dozier (1996) showed a participatory (versus authoritarian) organizational culture can nurture public relations excellence. Drawing upon ideas reminiscent of cultural approaches to community, Everett (1990) described organizational culture as a

cognitive system based on the group's experience and shared among members. He called for examining organizations as sociocultural systems (i.e., communities) using ethnoecological research.

Emerging Technologies

The advent of new technology has required public relations researchers to reexamine communication practices. Badaracco (1998) suggested the Internet provides the potential for the development of a true sense of community. The potential effect is to provide more equalized exchanges (Heath, 1998) and to rebalance power inequities (Coombs, 1998a, 1998b). Hearit (1999), based on his case study of the Intel Pentium chip controversy in 1994, argued that publics can be constituted online communities and can have a tangible effect on companies in a crisis.

The emergence of the community concept as a means to describing the linkages between participants in discussion groups and other forms of online communications led Cozier and Witmer (2001), using structuration theory, to argue that new technologies can create new publics. They call for the analysis of online communities and for the reconceptualization of organizations as systems composed of reproduced practices. In an empirical test of this idea, Stein (2001) found that employees believe establishing community in the workplace is important and that technologies can be an important part of that process. Interestingly, Stein found that employees had a greater sense of a virtual community at the departmental level, compared to either the regional or organization-wide levels.

Application of the community construct also can be seen in two communications specialties often associated with public relations.

Risk Communication

Research about risk is a cross-disciplinary field that focuses both on the communication of important information to individuals as well as groups who might be affected by hazards. Risk communications originally relied upon expert spokespersons to disseminate news and information. Heath and colleagues explain, however, that the old, linear paradigm has been replaced by a new democratic approach that emphasizes dialogue, conflict resolution, consensus building, and relationship development among affected parties (Heath, Bradshaw, & Lee, 2002). Professional risk communicators have adopted risk democracy models that include both local emergency planning committees and community advisory panels (also known as community advisory panels). Both structures play a pivotal role in both establishing policy and disseminating information within jurisdictions and the communities they serve.

Health Communications

In a similar vein, public health communication models today involve the proactive promotion of health and disease prevention (versus treatment of illness or

injury) and calls for the active participation, representation, and empowerment of community members rather than passive compliance by individuals at risk (Kar & Alcalay, 2001). Many traditional public health campaigns continue to be focused on geographic communities (Finnegan, Bracht, & Viswanath, 1989; Flora, Maccoby, & Farquhar, 1989; Hornick, 2002; Mittelmark et al., 1986; Nash & Farquhar, 1980; Weenig, 1993). Community-level campaigns, however, have also focused on ethnic and other subcommunities and on the importance of combining mediated communications with interpersonal efforts also known as social marketing. These efforts include health coalitions and partnerships composed of health care professionals and other care givers in a community (Braithwaite, Taylor, & Austin, 2000). Such efforts have focused on assessing community readiness (Oetting, Donnermeyer, Plested, Edwards, Kelly, & Beauvais, 1995) and striven to change behaviors and help people avoid risks through community preparedness and health-organizing activities in both urban and rural settings (Bracht, 1999, 2001). Most recently, health communicators have recognized the important potential contribution of the Internet in creating community among at-risk populations as well as their social support groups (Rice & Katz, 2001).

Other Approaches

Several other streams of research in public relations mesh easily with the community construct. For example, Springston and Keyton (2001; Springston, Keyton, Leichty, & Metzger, 1992) incorporated community orientation versus self-orientation as one of three dimensions in their model of public relations field dynamics. Borrowing from other applications in economics and political science, Hazelton and Kennan (2000) argued that the creation of social capital (a property of a community) is an alternative measure of public relationships and can be an important outcome of corporate communication. Broadly summarized, social capital theory suggests that the vitality and viability of society is enhanced by the quantity and quality of social (community) interaction, involvement, and participation (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Scheufele & Shah, 1999).

COMMUNITY BUILDING AS AN IDEAL IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Against this backdrop, a final argument for the adoption of community as a foundation for public relations is a philosophical one that addresses what public relations should strive to achieve as a professional practice. As a concept that resonates with American culture, community building appeals to many practitioners who want to engage in meaningful work that makes a constructive contribution to society.

As Hutton (1999) observed, public relations suffers from a clear and compelling explanation of its purpose as a field. Various metaphors have been proposed (e.g., Ewen, 1996; Harlow, 1977; Hutton 1999). Pioneer practitioner Lee once

likened his role to that of being a physician to corporate bodies. Later, practitioners were compared to attorneys who represent clients in the court of public opinion. In truth, such analogies to established professions are self-serving and smack of efforts to manage and manipulate.

The Concept of Community Building

Community building involves the integration of people and the organizations they create into a functional collectivity that strives toward common or compatible goals. Drawing upon the rhetorical and cultural elements discussed previously, community building can involve a variety of informational, persuasive, relational, or discursive approaches (Ruler & Vercic, 2002b) that create understanding—manifested in shared beliefs and values, rituals and traditions, and symbols and artifacts.

Researchers who have focused on community (Culbertson & Chen, 1997; Kruckeberg & Stark, 1988; Leeper & Leeper, 2001; Wilson, 1994, 1996) clearly see building community as a practical outcome to be achieved in public relations practice. Other scholars have called for practitioners to engage in community building (Banks, 1995; Hallahan, 1996; Neff, 1998; Vasquez, 1998). St. John (1998), a practitioner and writer in the field, pointed to the role of public relations in constructing community in the early American West and argued that the concept is equally relevant today. Meanwhile, the late Patrick Jackson, one of the field's most prominent practitioner-strategists and editor of the *pr reporter* newsletter, advocated community-building as a model for the practice ("Authentic communication," 1996; "Building community," 1997; "Community = relationships," 1997; Miller, 1995).

Community building implies that public relations is a proactive (versus reactive) endeavor that focuses on the positive and functional rather than the negative and dysfunctional. Community building also redirects public relations' focus away from its institutional focus and slavish emphasis on achieving organizational goals (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Holtzhausen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996) to address community citizenship. Community building provides a framework that can be used by both established (system) organizations and emerging (lifeworld) social movements or causes. Community building squares with the definition that public relations establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships on which an organization's or cause's success or failure depends (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1999). This shift also moves public relations away from an emphasis on control—what Bernays (1955) called the *engineering of consent*—to the two fundamental functions that public relations performs: providing counsel about community interests and facilitating communication. In short, community building is a broader and nobler metaphor that practitioners can rally around.

Three Dimensions of Community Building

Several of the explicit calls for community as a framework for public relations (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; K. Leeper, 1994, 1996; Wilson, 1994) are grounded

in the need for organizations to act responsibly and ethically. A community-oriented approach to public relations especially appeals to practitioners who seek to improve the practice's performance. Banks (1995) summarized the argument well:

[I]f Kruckeberg and Starck's idea is modified by recognizing that all communications from institutions in fact constitute forms of community (both desirable and undesirable), then the objection to their communitarian purpose can be overcome. By this I mean that organizations must recognize that their long-term ability to survive depends on fostering an attitude of social responsibility that nurtures socially healthy communities among their various publics. This observation, by which organizations see their well-being as intimately bound to the well-being of their publics, is not obvious in the short term; however, over long periods of time the convergence of interests between institutions and their relevant publics is unavoidable, and communities, whether positive and supportive or debilitating, are created and maintained. The fundamental goal of public relations, then, is to communicate in ways that nurture the development of positive and supportive communities, communities of which their institutions see themselves as members. (pp. 20–21)

The need for a greater emphasis on organizational social responsibility has been the subject of extensive discussion within public relations (e.g., Daugherty, 2001). Similarly, normative standards for responsible and ethical communications are the underlying premises of the IABC-supported Excellence studies (J. Grunig, 1992; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). If it is assumed that an organization is a part of one or more communities, and that community membership includes both rights and responsibilities, then the obligation of organizations to act in a socially responsible manner becomes readily apparent. In a similar way, extensive debate has ensued about ethical behavior by both organizational and public relations managers (e.g., Curtin & Boynton, 2001; Day, Dong, & Robins, 2001; Haas, 1998/2001; Holtzhausen, 2000; Kersten, 1994; Komisarjevsky, 2002; R. Leeper, 1996). If managers also recognize their organization's or cause's role in a community and that their personal loyalties belong to both their organization and to their communities, the framework for ethical decision making become more readily evident. An emphasis on community and community building thus suggests an effective way to improve public relations practice.

What is involved in building a community from the perspective of an organization or cause? Hallahan (1996) identified three distinct forms of community building activities: *community involvement*, *community nurturing*, and *community organizing*.

Community involvement entails public relations representatives facilitating an organization or cause's participation in an already-existing community. This is the traditional boundary-spanning task performed by community relations specialists (Burke, 1999). By becoming involved, practitioners and their organizations or causes can demonstrate legitimacy and the compatibility of their beliefs and values with others (Jensen, 2000). In so doing, community-involved organizations shed their bureaucratic fronts and don the personae of social actors (Heath, 1994).

Involvement involves socially responsible gestures (such as attendance at community events) and open and ethical communications, whether face-to-face or through media. Involvement can include promotional communications designed to inform community members about what the organization offers or to enhance an organization's reputation among community members. More importantly, involvement also includes participation in discussions and dialogue—where organizations and community members are both active speakers and listeners. Additionally, community involvement or engagement, as suggested here, makes no assumptions or normative judgments about communication symmetry (J. Grunig, 1983), the merits of advocacy versus accommodation (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; Murphy, 1991), or discourse ethics (Haas, 1998/2001, R. Leeper, 1996). Instead, ethical community involvement merely suggests community members have the right to voice their concerns and to be heard. Conversely, those to whom those concerns are directed enjoy the right and responsibility to listen and to respond.

Community nurturing involves fostering the economic, political, social, and cultural vitality of communities in which people and organizations or causes are members—beyond mere involvement expected of an organization as one of many community members. The importance of community nurturing within organizations has been expressed by forward-thinking business managers (Klein & Izzo, 1998; Manning, Curtis, & McMillen, 1996). Chappell (1994), for example, contended that a company is a community—in which values once associated with paternalism and team-building flourish and are fostered under as the aegis of community.

Many organizations nurture communities inside and outside of their organizational boundaries by serving as community sponsors, particularly in cases of communities of workers or customers. Examples range from Little League and fan clubs to employee work improvement teams. Sponsors can provide infrastructure and support systems, underwrite events, and supply information. Many of the community-building ideas suggested by Kruckeberg and Starck (1998; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001) are examples of community nurturing. This aspect of traditional community relations is familiar to many businesses that engage in volunteerism (Leeper, 1998) and philanthropy (Kelly, 1998). Many for-profit organizations believe they have an obligation to give back to the communities they serve, although some economists and business people argue to the contrary (e.g., Dunlap, 1996; Friedman, 1970). Some organization managers say philanthropy simply makes good business sense or is a quid pro quo—a form of enlightened self-interest. Legitimate community building, however, suggests such generosity is valuable because it is genuine and benefits everyone—and avoids exploitation (Rawlins & Stoker, 2001). Community organizing involves the grassroots forging of new communities among disparate individuals with common interests. This describes the formation of many clubs, associations, and societies. To the extent that this approach is rooted in social problems, community organizing resembles the formation of a public or a social movement (Hallahan, 2001). In reality, community organizing can take place at a variety of levels. For example, community

organizing might involve the application of public relations to support national development (Van Leuven, 1996; Van Leuven & Pratt, 1996) and thus involve participatory communications (Jacobson & Servaes, 1999; Servaes, Jacobson, & White, 1996). Alternatively, community organizing might involve the use of public relations strategies and tactics to improve economic or social conditions in a particular neighborhood or for members of a particular minority group (Bender, 1978; Biklen, 1983; Brager, Specht, & Torczyner, 1987; Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Jeffres & Dobos, 1984; Rivera & Erlich, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 1997; Schoenberg & Anderson, 1995).

Communities are constantly organizing and reorganizing, and employ public relations strategies and tactics in doing so. One concern is that such turmoil will result in community fragmentation. Change is inevitable; chaos theory suggests that upheaval will return to a natural state of normalcy (Murphy, 1996). To minimize fragmentation requires organizations or causes to strive to maintain and strengthen community ties.

In summary, the specific roles and activities of public relations professionals differ in each of these three dimensions of community building. In community involvement, public relations workers are agent representatives of an organization or cause and active participants in community conversations and activities. In community nurture, public relations professionals act as facilitators, orchestrators of rituals and events, producers of information, and coordinators of volunteer and philanthropic efforts. In community organizing, the roles are as recruiters and advocates. The overarching metaphor that encompasses all of these is community builder.

Community as an Ideal

This vision of community building extends the meaning of community in a way that might seem idealistic or even naïve. Indeed community itself has been labeled a tragic ideal (Tinder, 1980), nostalgic (Bernasconi, 1993; Cheney & Christensen, 2001), illusionary (Scherer, 1972), or absurdly utopian (Bellah et al., 1985). Similar criticisms have been lodged at concepts such as two-way symmetrical communication (e.g., L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

In today's increasing complex environment, public relations needs a strong ideal if the field is to reach its full potential as contributor to society. Kruckeberg (1998a) observed, "[T]he greatest challenge for 21st century public relations practitioners will be the identification of organizational values and their reconciliation with societal values within the context of a quickly and seemingly chaotic syncretizing popular culture" (p. 3).

To what degree must true community be achieved in order to be a viable concept in public relations? Scholars differ about what is required for true community. Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) differentiated between functional communities and conscious communities. A functional community is one in which members support the physical well-being of the group so that members are productive and social order can be maintained. Rorty (1989, 1991), a prominent social theorist,

argued this approach is sufficient. He stressed that a community exists when members share enough of the same beliefs and values for each to resolve disagreements through fruitful conversation. By contrast, a conscious community goes beyond mere functionality—but how far is not clear. Shaffer & Amundsen (1993) suggested that a conscious community emphasizes personal needs for expression, growth, and transformation. Mason (1993) argued that in a community members must also demonstrate genuine mutual concern and avoid the systematic exploitation of others. Similarly, Stevenson (1995) suggested that a community requires members to demonstrate an interest, a moral capacity, and empathy for others.

Overall, it might not be necessary to attain conscious community status for the idea of community to be useful in public relations. Indeed, it might be sufficient to create functioning communities that communicate effectively. Importantly, the creation of community does not require all members of a community to think alike. Postmodernism recognizes dissensus (Holtzhausen, 2000). Differences within communities are useful. Zarefsky (1995) suggested that community and diversity are complementary, dialectical terms. Pursuing either alone is destructive and unnecessary. He observed, “The common focus on the same story is a bond of community; the contest among alternative readings promotes diversity” (p. 7).

Friedman (1983) made a parallel distinction between two types of communities. A community of affinity is based on likemindedness—or what people think they have in common, such as race, sex, religion, nationality—or a common formula or creed. As he suggested, this idea is particularly powerful for those who feel oppressed. At the same time, he believed a community of affinity is a false community because members feel secure only because they are afraid of conflict and opposition. By contrast, Friedman proposed a community of otherness, wherein people find themselves in a common situation that they approach in different ways, and that discovery calls them out as individuals. There are just as many points of view as there are people in a community of otherness, without a polarization of communication.

Polarization was the concern of philosopher Martin Buber, whose I-Thou distinction focused on how individuals must strike a careful balance between the interest of self and the interest of others. Buber suggested that we must walk along a narrow ridge between the interests of self and the interests of others (e.g., Arnett, 1986). Palmer (1992, p. 25) made a similar distinction between competition (as represented in game theory; Murphy, 1989) and communal conflict (i.e., a public encounter in which the whole group can win by growing). Indeed, healthy conflict is possible only within the context of supportive community.

CONCLUSION

This chapter presented four arguments that support the idea that community is a potentially useful foundation for theory building about and for the practice of public relations.

First, at the pragmatic level, a focus on community links public relations to a widely accepted and valued idea in society—a concept that is receiving continuing attention in academe.

Second, at the theoretical level, community is a rich and versatile construct, and therefore a more useful construct than public—a concept that severely constricts theorizing and defies application in public relations.

Third, considerable momentum has developed among public relations researchers to use concepts closely related to community in studying the field. Besides explicit calls for a community-based focus, researchers now address community indirectly under the aegis of symmetrical, dialogic, and transactional communications; collaboration, collectivism, and social corporatism; and relationship management. Other researchers are tapping into critical, postmodern, and cultural research traditions that already have embraced the community notion. Still other researchers are applying community-based concepts to Internet, risk, and health communication.

Finally, at the philosophical level, this paper has argued that community building cogently summarizes what many practitioners envision that public relations ought to be—a proactive (nonreactive) effort to bring people together through involvement, nurturing, and organizing. This notion particularly resonates with Americans, but perhaps to a more limited degree elsewhere in the world where community is less recognized culturally.

By suggesting community as a foundation for public relations theory and practice, this essay further extends the call for public relations theorists and practitioners to examine alternative perspectives and domains for public relations practice (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; L. Grunig, 1992, p. 77; Karlberg, 1996). Unlikely as it is that community relations will usurp public relations as a unifying descriptor of the field, it is worthwhile to note that communication management has become the predominant term used to describe the function in Europe (Ruler & Vercic, 2002b, 2003; Vercic, van Ruler, Bütschi, & Flodin), and that the majority of Fortune 500 firms use terms other than public relations, (such as corporate communication and public affairs) to label the public relations function.

A focus on community reorients the field to examine how organizations fit into the large scheme of society, but also recognizes that organizations themselves are constituted of communities and subcommunities within them. Internal stakeholder groups are probably one of the best cases where community can be applied. In building an organization, managers create communities, which are measured in terms of the quality of relationships among participants.

Community offers the potential for organizations to become more socially responsible by heightening awareness of the greater whole of which the organization is a part. Community shifts the organizational emphasis from the cold treatment of impersonal, often adversarial publics, to a warmer, more enlightened emphasis on collaboration and cooperation with others.

Importantly, this shift does not presume naively that organizations automatically will act more responsibly, ethically, or humanely in dealing with others.

Indeed, the prospect remains that organizations can still exercise undue advantage or power (Kersten, 1994) to exploit community members for the organization's self-interest (Rawlins & Stoker, 2001; Trujillo, 1992). Indeed, community—like persuasion or information—can be misused as a mechanism of control (Gossett & Tompkins, 2001). Yet the idea of integrating organizational goals and activities with the needs, concerns, and interests of people is the very essence of public relations and creating community.

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