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Inactive Publics: The Forgotten Publics in Public Relations*

ABSTRACT: By focusing on activism and its consequences, recent public relations theory has largely ignored *inactive publics*, that is, stakeholder groups that demonstrate low levels of knowledge and involvement in the organization or its products, services, candidates, or causes, but are important to an organization. This article examines the nature of inactive publics and proposes a model that locates inactive publics among five categories of publics along the dimensions of knowledge and involvement. The model provides a theoretically rich alternative for how public relations practitioners might conceptualize *publics*, a central concept in public relations theory and practice.

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In recent years, public relations theory has focused mostly on publics that are interested in and concerned about the activities of organizations. Largely overlooked is the importance of groups that have only minimal motivation, ability, or opportunity to know about, talk about, or participate in efforts to influence the policies or practices of organizations. These forgotten constituencies can be referred to as *inactive publics*.

The field's preoccupation with activism is well-grounded theoretically and well-founded because of the potential consequences of activist groups, which can

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directly and immediately threaten the organization's goals or help to attain them. However, the assumption underlying contemporary theory focused around activists is that the interests of organizations and publics are necessarily at odds with one another. The focus on activism, as manifested in issues management, for example, implies that individuals who constitute a public are sufficiently interested and equipped to think about problems, to engage in meaningful conversation with others, and to organize to take action. For example, normative models that suggest public relations is practiced ideally as two-way, symmetric communication presume that publics are active participants and are both motivated and able to voice concerns through activities such as collaboration.¹ Similarly, situational theory is intended to serve as a predictor of activism, as measured in active information seeking and passive information processing.² Recent articles that draw on interpersonal communication, psychotherapy, and interorganizational communication similarly assume that organizations and publics must interact to form relationships.³

This article begins with a quite different set of assumptions from those that underlie much contemporary public relations theory. First, it assumes that not all public relations activities necessarily revolve around issues, disputes, or conflicts. Indeed, many public relations programs today merely involve building positive relationships. In such cases, differences between organizational interests and public needs might not exist or might be minimal at best.

Second, many organizational–public relationships can operate at an extremely low level, that is, rank-in-file members of a public have only minimal knowledge and involvement in the policies and practices of an organization. More important, this minimum-level relationship *suffices* both parties. A richer, more intensive, more “meaningful” relationship might not be necessary. Indeed, organizations might not have the financial, temporal, or human resources to establish close relationships with everyone; meanwhile, members of inactive publics simply have other concerns.

Third, the prospect of establishing and maintaining minimal relationships with inactive publics pose a set of communication challenges that are quite different from interactions with highly active publics, where communications are often highly reactive, interactive, and sometimes confrontational. Such communications efforts require different strategies that public relations theorists must begin to address in a more coherent manner.⁴

DEFINING INACTIVE PUBLICS

One of the most conceptually troublesome notions in contemporary public relations is the idea of a *public*. In its classical definition, public is reserved to describe groups that are actively involved in the discussion of a public issue. Publics, thus, are organized around issues. Dewey defined a public as a group of people who (1) face a similar problem, (2) recognize the problem exists, and (3) organize to do something about the problem. Blumer later offered a similar defi-

nition of public as a group of people who are (1) confronted by an issue, (2) divided in their ideas about how to meet the issue, and (3) engaged in discussion about the issue.⁵

In contemporary public relations practice, this narrow definition of a public is largely ignored. Researchers and practitioners often use the term *public* when referring to a variety of other, closely related concepts. Public is used to refer to potential or actual *audiences*, that is, receivers of messages. Public also is used to describe *segments*, such as a market segment, that is, a group of people who share particular demographic, psychographic or geodemographic characteristics and thus are likely to behave or respond to organizational actions or messages in a similar way. With increased frequency, public is used to refer to *communities*, that is, groups drawn together by shared experiences, values, or symbols. Public also can be used synonymously with *constituents*, that is, groups (such as voters) that an organization serves and to whom the organization is ethically or legally responsible.

The term is also used to denote *stakeholders*, that is, people who are impacted by the actions of an organization. In their three-stage model of issue development, Grunig and Repper (1992) illustrated the difficulty of nomenclature. In describing the first stage, the *stakeholder stage*, they wrote:

An organization has a relationship with stakeholders when the behavior of the organization or of the stakeholder has consequences on the other. Public relations should do formative research to scan the environment and the behavior of the organization to identify their consequences. Ongoing communication with these stakeholders helps to build a stable, long-term relationship that manages conflict that may occur in the relationship.⁶

The authors explained that the second stage, the *public stage*, occurs when “stakeholders recognize one or more consequences of a problem and organize to do something about it or them.” Finally, they identified the *issue stage*, which is “not reached until publics organize and create issues out of the problems they perceive.” Grunig and Repper admitted only subtle differences between a stakeholder group and a public. In particular, stakeholders are *passive*: “Stakeholders who are or become more aware and active can be described as publics.”⁷ This inconsistency is troublesome because Grunig and Repper freely acknowledged that public relations initiatives are not limited to publics alone, that is, active groups, but can (and should) be directed to passive stakeholder groups as well.

One way to reconcile this problem is to define *all* groups to which public relations efforts are directed as publics, but to recognize that they differ in their levels of activity–passivity. Inactive publics largely meet the definition of stakeholders,⁸ but no assumption is necessarily made that they recognize their stakeholder role. This approach is considerably more straightforward and subtly extracts the definition of public from a discursive framework, that is, a requirement that a concerted interaction among individuals is necessary for a public to exist.⁹ Thus a public might be defined simply as a group with which an organization wishes to

establish and maintain a relationship. Alternatively, a public can be defined as a group of people who relate to an organization, who demonstrate varying degrees of activity–passivity, and who might (or might not) interact with others concerning their relationship with the organization.

Inactive public, as defined here, is strikingly akin to the notion of a *mass*, which along with *crowd* and *public* constitute the three principal categories of social groups identified by Blumer. The noted sociologist distinguished a mass from a public by observing that a mass “merely consists of an aggregation of people who are separate, detached, anonymous” and who act in response to their own needs.¹⁰ A mass is characterized by very little interaction or communication, considerable homogeneity, and wide geographic dispersion. However, members of a mass are brought together by some common source of interest or attention. This might include, for example, the identity people share as citizens of a nation or the common stake they have in an organization. In this sense, a mass or an inactive public might be considered a *symbolic community*, a group of people who share a common set of symbols and experiences.¹¹

A SOCIETY OF LOW-LEVEL RELATIONSHIPS

The inactive nature of the population in modern society has been recognized by sociologists, political theorists, and journalists. Theories of mass society, as first proposed by classical sociologists, suggest that individuals have become atomized members of society through the division of labor and estrangement from others. In mass society, people are thrust into a social system dramatically different from the communal structure that characterized life before the rise of urbanization and industrialization.¹²

Lippmann was one of the first observers of the implications of these changes for communications and the political process. He observed that, by the 1920s, people no longer acted based on direct experience, but were dependent on secondary information sources such as the mass media. Lippmann argued that people act based on the resulting “pictures inside our heads.”¹³ Later, he suggested that the population in modern society had become a *phantom public* that was mostly disinterested in public affairs and quite content to delegate decision making about issues to experts.¹⁴ Subsequent writers have lamented the decline in the robustness of public discussion and debate.¹⁵

Significantly, inactivity should not be confused with deliberate manipulation or control by powerful forces within society, as critical theorists suggest.¹⁶ Indeed, inactivity is not equivalent to a lack of capability or concern for others by people in society. Research in the past three decades suggests that audiences are not passive, but are active processors of information. People construct their own meaning from mediated messages and other forms of communication and put information in the context of their own lives.¹⁷

In large measure, the inactivity characteristic of mass publics today can be

explained as a function of the large, complex, interdependent nature of modern society. Today, people juggle a variety of different activities and concerns in their daily lives. Cognitive psychologists have characterized humans as “cognitive misers,”¹⁸ who process information only as required to cope with information overload.¹⁹ People can cope with only a limited number of problems or situations in their lives at one time. In the same way, the carrying capacity of public arenas to address social problems or issues is limited.²⁰

As a result, people are *selective* about the issues in which they become involved or consider important. Individuals enter into deep relationships with only a handful of other individuals (spouses, significant others, friends) and only a few organizations or institutions (most notably, schools and employers). Yet as a matter of survival, they also enter into a wide range of secondary or tertiary relationships that are much more superficial and purposely limited in scope. Not all relationships are equally important; thus assumptions that public relations should treat every organizational-public relationship in the same way requires careful scrutiny.²¹

Resource dependency theory, for example, suggests that people enter into relationships in response to the need for resources.²² In today’s industrial society, publics contract with large, complex organizations that provide services ranging from groceries to utilities. As long as those services are provided reliably and satisfactorily, and within a range of ethical expectations, there is no reason for many people to pay much attention to these organizations or desire a more in-depth relationship with the organization that provides them. The closing of gaps in expectations is one basis for dealing with issues, whereas the elimination of gaps in reliability and satisfaction is behind the recent total quality management movement in organizations.²³

Social exchange theory suggests that people enter into relationships by analyzing costs versus benefits. People expect benefits to exceed costs, and people will withdraw from a relationship whenever perceived costs exceed benefits, based on their analysis of comparison levels.²⁴ Under this socioeconomic approach to relationships, people have little incentive to change (or incur “switching costs”) unless the perceived costs significantly exceed the perceived benefits. Unless the problem is particularly important, or people are prompted to act by external actors, inertia can lead to indifference and inactivity or what might be termed *routine behaviors*.²⁵

A TYPOLOGY OF PUBLICS

What defines inactive publics? An inactive public is theoretically the opposite of an active public. An analysis of the behavioral literature suggests that two criteria are paramount in understanding the behaviors of individuals and the groups they comprise: the knowledge that individuals and groups hold about a particular topic and their involvement in the topic. The logical extension of this approach is to suggest a five-cell model that differentiates groups

	<i>Low Involvement</i>	<i>High Involvement</i>
<i>High Knowledge</i>	Aware Publics	Active Publics
<i>Low Knowledge</i>	Inactive Publics	Aroused Publics

*No Knowledge/
No Involvement*

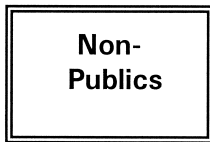


Figure 1. Five Publics Model Based On Knowledge And Involvement

exhibiting different combinations of high and low involvement and high and low knowledge, plus a provision for groups that exhibit virtually no knowledge nor involvement (Fig. 1). Significantly, this model builds up previous theorizing about publics in political science and extends and refines J. Grunig’s classification scheme for publics.²⁶

Inactive Publics

Inactive publics are conceptualized here as groups composed of individuals who, as a whole, possess comparatively low levels of knowledge about an organization and low levels of involvement in its operations. Knowledge and involvement similarly can be operationalized in terms of the products, services, candidates, or causes provided or represented by an organization. Inactive publics generally are organization stakeholders who might or might not recognize the consequences for them of an organization’s actions. As a whole, members of inactive publics might be satisfied with the relationship that exists between them and an organization because the relationship meets their needs. Alternatively, members of inactive publics might believe it is not worthwhile to challenge the relationship or might take the relationship for granted without much consideration. Yet others might take a fatalistic position that nothing can be done to alter the situation.

Aroused Publics

Aroused publics share comparatively low levels of knowledge about an organization and its operations with inactive publics, but include people who have recognized a potential problem or issue. Their level of involvement is heightened. Their arousal can be prompted by several different factors: personal experience; media reports or advertising about a situation involving others with whom they identify; discussions with friends; or exposure to issue creation efforts by organizers for social movements, special interest groups, or political parties. The transformation of individuals from an inactive to an aroused state and, eventually, to an active state constitutes the limited focus of situational theory.

Aroused Publics

Aware publics include groups that might be knowledgeable generally about an organization or situation, even though its members might not be affected by it directly. Aware publics often include groups labeled by political scientists as *attentive publics*, that is, the stratum of society that is generally knowledgeable about the world (including public affairs) and serve as opinion leaders through their positions in society, education, or backgrounds.²⁷ These groups can include *all-issue* publics. Aware publics, in contrast to merely aroused publics, can be knowledgeable about an organization and or its activities and might be able to articulate the origins, processes, and consequences of potential issues. However, merely aware publics do not have a personal stake.

Active Publics

Active publics are composed of individuals who share both high involvement and high knowledge of an organization (or an issue) and thus are predisposed to monitor situations and to organize, if required. They clearly meet the traditional definition of a public set forth by Dewey and Blumer. Examples include the leaders of social movements and special interest groups as well as close followers who are willing to exert personal time and effort to effect change. Active publics often are directly involved in issue advocacy; might serve as missionaries for the cause; and might serve as representatives for a social movement, special interest group, or political party in interactions with an organization.

Nonpublics

Nonpublics, the default component in the model, are composed of individuals with no knowledge and no involvement whatsoever with an organization. However, once individuals attain any level of knowledge or involvement, they properly should be accorded inactive public status.

An Alternative Perspective on Publics

Others have suggested the potential value of reassessing the classification of publics used in the field. For example, Goldman and Theus sug-

gested, based on their study of two healthcare organizations, the need for “another look at the accepted definitions of aware and active publics” and called for a redefinition of the terms as used in Grunig’s model.²⁸

This model of publics departs from Grunig’s typology of active, aware, latent, and nonpublics in several ways. First, its purpose is to identify the different *states* in which groups and individuals might be found for purposes of an organization *initiating communications* with them, rather than predicting the probability of an individual becoming aroused about or active on an issue. J. Grunig’s model in situational theory makes the presumption that activism is the ultimate result. Second, the model presented here incorporates, as *antecedents*, the general concepts of knowledge and involvement, rather than problem recognition, constraint recognition and involvement. In particular, the emphasis is on prior knowledge as a *predictor* of responses to communication efforts, rather than information gain (in the form of passive information processing or active information seeking) as an outcome.

Third, this model differentiates between inactive and aroused publics, which J. Grunig combines as *latent* publics. Latency to become active is proposed here to be a *trait* (vs. *state*) that can be found among individuals within any of these categories. Although an individual who is merely aware (high knowledge but low involvement) has the potential to move into the active category, individuals within the aroused category are more likely to become activists because their level of involvement has been activated, even though their knowledge might still be undeveloped. Thus, the model suggests that heightened involvement or recognition of relevance is a prerequisite for knowledge acquisition leading to activism.

Fourth, the model reserves use of the term *aware* to mean knowledge, and thus suggests that knowledge about a problem is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for an individual or group to become active. Activism requires both knowledge and involvement, unless aware publics are motivated by factors other than their personal involvement in the issue itself, for example, power, greed, political duty, or professional responsibility. By recognizing that there are people who were merely aware of a problem or issue, it explicitly acknowledges the importance of third parties and third-party groups that are not addressed in J. Grunig’s model of publics or in situational theory.

Finally, the use of the term *nonpublic* here attempts to reconcile Grunig’s construct with the conceptual framework outlined here. Under Grunig’s original conceptualization,²⁹ a nonpublic fails to meet Dewey’s definition of a public because it is not organized around an issue, and the actions of the organization have no consequences for the public, and vice versa. Yet, many nonpublics actually can have knowledge about an organization, product, service, candidate, or cause. This model specifies that only groups that have absolutely no knowledge and no involvement can be classified as nonpublics. In the segmentation of publics, organizations can and probably will choose to ignore nonpublics. However, organizations might also choose to ignore segments of inactive publics for a variety of reasons, such as a lack of resources.

KNOWLEDGE AND INVOLVEMENT AS CRITERIA FOR DEFINING PUBLICS

The rationale for defining publics along the two dimensions of knowledge and involvement is well grounded in recent research in social psychology and consumer behavior. These two constructs have been identified as important factors in learning, information processing and persuasion.

Knowledge, a variable related to ability, refers to beliefs and attitudes held in memory about a particular object, person, situation, or organization, based on everyday experience or formal education.³⁰ Beliefs involve what a person holds to be true; attitudes represent predispositions toward an object based on beliefs and values.³¹ Knowledge is believed to be organized in memory as *associated networks* of memory nodes³² or in hierarchical knowledge structures known as schemas.³³ Experts on a particular topic, that is, individuals with well developed networks or schemas related to a particular topic, are believed to attend to messages more frequently and are able to make sense of them more readily than others.³⁴

Expertise or familiarity, however, does not mean that information is processed more thoroughly. Individuals with high levels of knowledge can process information more efficiently and with less effort because they compare information to extant knowledge stored in memory to discern discrepancies, and then focus cognitive capacity on reconciling differences, that is, either reinterpreting the meaning of the message or altering extant knowledge when new or more credible information is obtained. Experts can be quite discriminating in making judgments about the validity of messages.

Novices, or individuals with low levels of extant knowledge, are at a disadvantage in information processing. They are less likely to attend to messages with which they are not familiar and must exert more effort to make sense of information, such as identifying the appropriate schema where information fits. Individuals with low knowledge of a topic have difficulty placing information in context and often can miscomprehend information.³⁵ Novices are less discriminating and often will accept a wider range of arguments as being valid because they are less equipped to challenge the validity of claims.³⁶

Involvement, a motivation variable, has been recognized as a distinct construct from knowledge and refers to the degree to which an individual sees an object, person, situation, or organization as being personally *relevant* or having personal *consequences*.³⁷ Mitchell described involvement as “an individual level, state variable that indicates the amount of arousal, interest or drive evoked by a particular stimulus or situation.”³⁸

Although the involvement construct suffers from a variety of conceptualizations,³⁹ involvement has generated robust findings among researchers. The involvement construct was first conceived a half century ago by Sherif and Cantril⁴⁰ and became a focus of applied communication research beginning with research on low-involvement learning from television advertising.⁴¹ A particularly useful differentiation was suggested by Houston and Rothschild, who distinguished between *situational involvement*, that is, the short-term need to make a judgment,

and *enduring involvement*, that is, motivation related to the long-term or inherent qualities of an object or topic linked to an individual's personality.⁴²

In social psychology, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM)⁴³ and the lesser-known Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM)⁴⁴ both posit that topic-relevant involvement can play a pivotal role in the *strategies* people use to process information. High involvement individuals process information effortfully (ELM) or systematically (HSM), whereas individuals with low involvement rely on cognitive shortcuts referred to as peripheral cues (ELM) or heuristics (HSM). Both models posit that behavior change effected by central route (ELM) or systematic (HSM) processing is more effective and enduring than persuasion that relies on peripheral route (ELM) or heuristic (HSM) processing.

J. Grunig recognizes the importance of involvement in the development of issues in public relations. He drew on Krugman to define involvement as the degree to which a person feels "connected" to an issue.⁴⁵ In situational theory, high involvement (combined with high problem recognition and low constraint recognition) leads to greater information gain. Theus has similarly pointed to the importance of involvement as a central factor in information processing, suggesting that "problem recognition," as stated in Grunig's situational theory, might be reconsidered as a component measure of involvement.⁴⁶

Elsewhere, Heath and Douglas documented the importance of involvement in discussions in public policy issues. Involved individuals exert more effort to communicate, as evidenced in being able to generate more cognitive responses (pro or con), engage in greater reading and television viewing, and discuss issues more with others when compared to uninvolved individuals.⁴⁷ Cameron suggested that involvement can be explained functionally as a process of spreading activation within associated networks in memory.⁴⁸

ALTERNATE STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PUBLICS

Communicating with inactive publics, characterized by low levels of knowledge and involvement, impose special challenges to public relations communicators—problems that have been overlooked in theorizing about dealing with publics.

Normative theorists contend that the ideal way to practice public relations involves two-way, symmetric communication.⁴⁹ Such approaches make sense when an organization is responding to active publics, where the principal actors involved in communication exchanges are the leaders of a social movement or special interest group. Generally, these leaders are both highly motivated and able to engage in an active, two-way collaboration. J. Grunig has argued that symmetric communication involves ("can include") central route processing.⁵⁰ Indeed, the idea of two-way, symmetric communication is important to the extent that it is an ideal or a strategy to be used by organizations to be open to the worldviews of others and contributes to a more accurate enactment of the environment around

them.⁵¹ However, two-way, symmetric communication might not be adequate to describe what actually occurs in organizational–public relationships, except in limited instances.

Coleman has observed that modern society is becoming increasingly *asymmetric* in its orientation, particularly with the rise of corporate entities. He suggests that at least three types of relational exchanges can take place: person-to-person, corporate-to-corporate and corporate-to-person.⁵² Notions of two-way, symmetric communication make sense in communication exchanges involving one organization to another organization, such as large corporation dealing with a large activist group, such as an environmental group, a labor union, or competing corporation. However, when the exchange crosses levels of actors and involves a corporate-to-person exchange, the presumption of symmetric communication is problematic. Significantly, this is not because of the organization's lack of commitment to fostering good relationships. Instead, the lack of balance stems from the lesser motivation and ability found on the part of the public in any exchange with an organization.

Despite efforts to personalize organizations, that is, to help organizations develop a *persona*,⁵³ theorists confound reality when they suggest that communications involving a large *unnatural* organization operates in the same way as communication among *natural* persons. Coleman observes that corporate actors (1) typically have large resources, (2) nearly always control the conditions surrounding the relationship, and (3) control much of the information relevant to the interaction.⁵⁴ This is not unexpected because often, organizations possess far more knowledge and are more involved. Indeed, organizations often have greater incentives to establish and maintain a relationship and extract favorable outcomes with potential customers, investors, donors, employees, or voters than do the publics with whom they are trying to establish and maintain a relationship.

The issue of probable asymmetry is particularly important when dealing with inactive publics, where large organizations inherently possess greater power.⁵⁵ The concern here does not involve attempts to exploit or manipulate people. Rather, with the possible exception of its highest leadership, the rank-and-file members of many publics are *never likely* to share the same level of knowledge and involvement about a topic as the organization that seeks to communicate with them about it. Many times, individual members of publics have other options available to them and thus might have less incentive to increase either their knowledge or involvement.

Figure 2 illustrates the alternatives challenges confronting an organization when dealing with publics that might be found in each category. Figure 2 also suggests that the communication strategies appropriate to pursue are considerably different depending on the type of public involved.

Active publics, that is, those with high knowledge and involvement, are the groups most likely to be organized, with formal structures and leaders, and are most likely to collaborate. Organizations do not need to attract attention or entice active publics to communicate with them. The public will come to them and will create their own opportunities to communicate.

Active Publics	Aware Publics	Aroused Publics	Inactive Publics	Nonpublics
<p><i>Characteristics</i> High knowledge and involvement Potentially vocal and aggressive.</p> <p><i>Situation:</i> Publics have recognized problem or opportunity, have devoted cognitive effort to understand it, and might have exerted effort to effect a change. Publics are likely to come forward and to create the opportunity to communicate.</p> <p><i>Organizational Response Strategies:</i> Acknowledge Provide support and nurture Engage in dialogue Negotiate and bargain with leaders Possibly alter organization policies Seek third-party intervention</p>	<p><i>Characteristics</i> High knowledge, low involvement. Stable, reticent, potentially influential.</p> <p><i>Situation:</i> Publics might recognize issue, spend effort to learn about it, but don't get involved directly. Publics monitor situation, might attempt to influence others, but are unlikely to communicate with the organization, except when it serves their own interests.</p> <p><i>Communication Response Strategies:</i> Supply information Encourage (or discourage) role as influencer of others Monitor behavior</p>	<p><i>Characteristics:</i> Moderate-high involvement, but low knowledge. Potentially volatile.</p> <p><i>Situation:</i> Publics are at least familiar with problem or opportunity. Likely to seek knowledge to reduce risk or uncertainty, depending on motivation and access to resources.</p> <p><i>Organizational Response Strategies:</i> Understand source of arousal Examine arguments, causes for public's concerns Supply information that addresses concerns and clarifies misunderstandings Monitor behavior</p>	<p><i>Characteristics</i> Low involvement and low knowledge Inert.</p> <p><i>Situation:</i> Publics are unaware or only minimally familiar with and interested in organization, product, service, candidate or cause. Unlikely to attend to messages, focus on concerns, or seek information without prompt.</p> <p><i>Organizational Response Strategies:</i> Enhance motivation and ability to process. Create opportunities to communicate.</p>	<p><i>Characteristics</i> No involvement and no knowledge. Irrelevant</p> <p><i>Situation:</i> Public completely unaware of organization (and vice versa).</p> <p><i>Organizational Response Strategy:</i> Ignore Create reason for knowledge or involvement</p>

Figure 2. Alternative Strategies for Communicating with Publics

On the other hand, merely aware publics and merely aroused publics are much less likely to be organized or to be spearheaded by a leadership group that presses demands. Organizations dealing with aware or merely aroused publics are likely to need to respond to individual members of these groups on an individual

basis. Members of aware or aroused publics might call, write, or visit as part of their process of monitoring (aware publics) or active information- or remedy-seeking (aroused publics). The imperative of the organization is to be responsive to such inquiries and thus seize opportunities to build relationships or to contain potential problems that might escalate later. Organizations also might choose to seek out such groups and to educate them or allay their concerns, as appropriate.

By contrast, inactive publics (and certainly nonpublics) are unlikely to engage in any deliberate information seeking efforts, other than to satisfy routine personal needs. In the case of inactive publics, it becomes incumbent on organizations to *seek out* these groups, not because they are will become activists, but rather to build positive relationships. Organizations must initiate and assume responsibility for the communication process because of the unrecognized or marginal interest often exhibited by inactive publics.⁵⁶

The inertia that characterizes inactive publics places the burden on the organization to establish communication programs that gain the attention and engage less attentive publics. Indeed, this often merits use of techniques associated with the much-maligned models of public relations involving press agency; public information; and one-way, asymmetrical communication. Indeed, before any higher-order levels of communication (such as dialogue or negotiation) can begin, it is first necessary to engage otherwise inattentive publics. This involves enhancing their motivation and ability to focus on the organization and its messages and by providing adequate opportunities for them to do so.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

This article challenges contemporary thinking about public relations by reminding theorists and researchers about inactive publics, a category of publics that have been largely ignored in the literature. Inactive publics need to be understood better because of the large numbers of people they often represent and the emphasis placed on them in many public relations campaigns as organizations strive to influence the way inactive publics buy, invest, donate, work, and vote. Inactive publics, as a group, are important, long-term constituents for many organizations, which are desperately seeking ways to do a better job of communicating with them.

By defining inactive publics as groups with low involvement and low knowledge in an organization (or its products, services, candidates, or causes), this article has identified two of the most critical variables that also merit greater theoretical attention from the field. The degree to which an individual or group is involved or perceives that an organization is relevant to them personally is a critical factor in determining the degree to which people are motivated to attend to or respond to an organization's public relations efforts. At the same time, the degree to which an individual or group is knowledgeable about an organization dramatically influences their ability to comprehend those efforts and to respond accordingly.

From this discussion it should be evident that a wide range of alternative

response strategies, based on whether a public is active, merely aware, merely aroused, or inactive, might be appropriate. Although normative theory suggests that public relations is ideally practiced as two-way, symmetric communication, that notion has been challenged in recent years by contingency theories that suggest that a combination of advocacy and accommodation might be called for.⁵⁸ The model presented here contributes to that discussion by suggesting that advocacy might be especially valuable, to the extent that a particular public is less active, that is, less involved and less knowledgeable, in a particular topic or issue. Moreover, the alternative strategies suggested in Figure 2 go beyond the simple advocacy–accommodation continuum suggested by others to outline some of the more specific response strategies that an organization might undertake.

Notes

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