

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Where Public Interest, Virtue Ethics and Pragmatic Sociology Meet: Modelling a Socially Progressive Approach for Communication

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For advertising, public relations and strategic communication to work towards human good they must have a framework. This paper advances such a theoretical framework by drawing on three related but separate fields of theory: public interest from political philosophy; virtue ethics from moral philosophy; public arenas of debate from pragmatic sociology. By exploring these as stand-alone theories and then examining their cross-currents and intersections, the paper develops a pragmatic approach for communication scholarship which can be used as a conceptual intervention for socially progressive practice. The paper applies this approach to the case of two international festivals: The Torches of Freedom contribution to New York's 1929 annual Easter Parade; and the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras held in Sydney from 1978 to the present. The festivals illustrate how the discursive construction (and reconstruction) of events underpins both changing circuits of cultural production and ongoing dialectical tensions, raising challenges and solutions for professional communication practice.

Keywords: Public interest; virtue ethics; public arenas; communication; pragmatism; advertising; public relations

Introduction

In 2020, the World Public Relations Forum called for courage from communication professionals. It prefaced this by asking: how do we navigate the shifts affecting society? how do we ensure that connections are authentic, sustainable and represent the multitude of voices? Its answer:

It takes ... courage to represent public interest, steer ethically and be conscientious... The courage to acknowledge the gaps in and evolve our professional capabilities. The courage to question our tried and tested approach, think ahead and be creative. (World Public Relations Forum, 2020)

This challenge targets a (re)focusing by the communication professions in navigating social, political and cultural problems in order to disrupt existing paradigms and explore new ones in moving into the 2020s. That call, as with this special issue, seeks to locate the potential for motivating progressive behaviours and actions through ethical and creative communication.

This paper starts from the proposition that for advertising, public relations and strategic communication to advance in this way, they must have a workable theoretical framework. In proposing such a framework it draws from the theory of 'human good' as described by Aristotle and others (Bertrand, 2009; Maguire, 1997) and its close cousin 'public interest' (Bozeman, 2007; Flatham, 1966; Johnston, 2016), and positions these within so-called 'public arenas of debate' (Cefai, 2016; Badouard, Mabi and Monnoyer-Smith, 2016). It proposes that through these fields of moral philosophy (human good), political philosophy (public interest) and sociology (public arenas of debate), we can develop interconnected building blocks to create pragmatic solutions to assist communication professionals in dealing with issues and problems in order to motivate progress. The approach of this paper draws insight and inspiration from Dewey (1927; 1991) and later Bozeman (2007), who called the public interest a field of 'pragmatic idealism', which Bozeman described as: 'keeping in mind an ideal of the public interest ... moving toward that ideal, making the ideal more concrete as one moves toward it' (2007, 13).

This framework therefore makes it incumbent on communication professions to better understand the conceptual elements of human good, public interest and public arenas of debate, and the discursive spaces where these intersect. To illustrate these theories and see these intersections in practice, the paper presents an analysis of two culturally-defining events, each representing social movements and progress in their time. The two events – the 1929 'Torches of Freedom' part of the New York Easter march in the United States and the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in Australia from 1978 to 2020 – illustrate not only how shifting cultural and political values drive change, but how the role of the communicator as agent is inexorably involved in depicting and progressing the cultural and political milieu of the time and in connecting with stakeholders through media and other communication tools. In turn, these events provide illustrations of the theoretical interventions for socially progressive practice.

This paper extends the focus beyond advertising as a stand-alone field to embrace strategic communication more generally. It does this for several reasons. First, the learnings from the paper are equally useful for and applicable to a range of communication professions, plus non-professional communicators such as activists and other advocates who also act in this space. Second, it follows the work of others (e.g. Zeffass, Verčič, Nothhaft and Werder, 2018) who see strategic communication as inclusive of a range of communication industries – including public relations, marketing, integrated marketing communication, advertising, and so on, – and see the field better served by breaking down borders rather than retaining them. Third, since the public interest – essentially a political philosophy and mechanism for democracy – has been extended into the field of communication theory (Johnston and Pieczka, 2018), the paper proposes to advance the field more generally across the communication industries rather than siloing it. Fourth, and finally, since ethics scholars point to *all* professions being in need of professional atonement, the learnings need not be industry-specific. Friedson notes that 'the most important problem for the future of professionalism is not economic, political or structural, but its soul' (Friedson, 2001 in Blackburn, 2002, 1). This statement points to the very areas this paper will explore, while keeping communication and social progress as its focus.

The paper draws from three discrete but overlapping fields of theory: public interest from political philosophy; human good and virtue ethics from moral philosophy; arenas of public

debate from pragmatic sociology. Although these fields will be examined separately in the first part of this paper, their overlapping ideas and cross-currents will become clear and will be further explored within the context of the two festival events. Indeed, as ethics scholar Margaret Blackburn notes (2003), no single ethical approach can claim to offer answers to all the questions arising in professional practice. Collectively, then, the theories will provide useful prisms through which to navigate ethical practice and build a framework for thinking and acting conscientiously in progressive communication practice.

The public interest and communication

More than sixty years ago, American political philosopher Richard Flathman (1966, 13) asserted that 'the problems associated with "public interest" are among the crucial problems of politics'. At the time, the public interest had been criticised for its lack of empiricism, its ambiguity and mutability (Schubert, 1961; Sorauf, 1957). This stream of rejection, which saw the public interest as unscientific in character, suggested it would 'never be missed [if] expunged from vocabularies' (Sorauf, 1957, 638). Flathman, however, rejected the criticism, noting: 'we are free to abandon the concept, but if we do so we will simply have to wrestle with the *problems* under some other heading' (1966, 13, original emphasis retained). Flathman also warned against the summation of interests resulting in ideas of (a singular) 'the' public interest – what he called the Benthamite position – arguing 'this summation [is] not merely difficult but ... logically impossible' (1966, 21). Indeed, it is the debate that ensues from *conflicting interests* that makes the public interest very real, not because it represents any over-arching public interest, but because it is, for the large part, about the *process* of seeking to accommodate *various or competing* public interests.

What is central to every public interest decision is its inherent flexibility that is contextually and time dependent. Indeed, it is widely accepted that public interest is a shape-shifter, altering with context and time, not defined uniformly but according to circumstance and cultural and political norms. In 1978, the British House of Lords confirmed this in a judgment, noting that: 'The categories of the public interest are not closed, and must alter from time to time ... as social conditions and social legislation develop' (*D v National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children*). More recently, Sparrow (2012) expanded this commentary in relation to public interest journalism, noting how the public interest changes dramatically over time:

For example, 50 years ago it was assumed that there was a public interest in knowing that an MP was gay, but little or no public interest in whether he drove home drunk, hit his wife or furnished his house using wood from non-sustainable sources. Now, obviously, it's the other way round. Society does—and should—constantly redefine what the public interest entails (Sparrow, 2012 in Elliott, 2012).

In the drafting of laws and policy, similar arguments prevail. Carter and Bouris (2006, 4) note: 'Legislators and policy makers recognise that the public interest will change over time and according to the circumstances of each situation.'

Some scholars have used the concept of 'public good' to advance ideas in this field, reaffirming how the public good/interest is discursively constructed. In their analysis, Calhoun (1998) and Mansbridge (1998) remind us that public good is not something we stumble on, rather it must be 'forged not simply found' (Mansbridge, 1998, 12). Or as Calhoun puts it: 'It is created in and through public process, it does not exist in advance of it' (1998, 32). But Calhoun also points out that the conditions of large-scale societies and public life start with 'the recognition of deep differences among us and [build] faith in meaningful communication across lines of difference' (1998, 32).

Thus, while the public interest is viewed through many different theoretical perspectives (see, for example, Bozeman, 2007; Campbell and Marshall, 2002; Flathman, 1966; Mansbridge, 1998; Sorauf, 1957) what is most important for this paper, and part of its compelling nature within liberal democracies, is its accommodation of pluralism and embracing of the politics of difference. Scholars note how the postmodern turn brought with it an awareness of such differences, otherness and the dynamic nature of situations, plus the rejection of a universalising of interests (Campbell and Marshall, 2002; Johnston, 2016; Mansbridge, 1998). This sees a recognition of the fragmented, pluralistic and heterogeneous nature of contemporary societies and the lived experiences of people within them. As such, the politics of difference provides the right to voice decisions that affect a wide range of publics and communities, including indigenous peoples, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, women, and the LGBTQI+ community (Campbell and Marshall, 2002). In turn, public interest-oriented information is placed in the public domain via public interest-forming practices (Johnston and Pieczka, 2018) which are open to scrutiny to ensure governments and businesses are accountable and transparent and, importantly, deliver benefits to society (Henninger, 2013). Johnston (2016) argues that it is precisely because of these functions of informing, interpreting and advising that communication industries like public relations, political communication and public affairs are centrally placed to provide information and clarify contemporary social and political currents of thought on social issues.

Moreover, Johnston and Pieczka (2018) propose that public interest should not be seen as extraneous to communication; instead they position communication as constitutive of public interest – hence determining that ‘*public interest communication*’ represents an extension of the theoretical political concept. Following Dewey, they suggest going beyond normative commitments to consensus or dissensus, instead taking a pragmatic approach to communication and the interests that are managed through discourse and reflexive enquiry (Johnston and Pieczka, 2018). In turn, they propose that a dialectical relationship exists with ‘all public interest-forming practices, whether enacted through the institutions of the state, such as the legislature or the judiciary, or through civil society’ (2018, 9). According to this view, the role of communication in the public interest is not marginal; rather, communication is *central* to the discourses that frame our understanding of social, political, cultural and global issues. As such, the communication professions bring agency to the public interest. Here, we find a clear linkage between public interest and the moral philosophy of virtue ethics, in particular, the idea of agent-based virtue ethics. The paper now moves to examine how virtue ethics can provide insights for the communication professions, thus building the framework for ethical practice.

Human good and virtue ethics

A logical entry point to human good and virtue ethics for the communication professions is to consider the virtue ethics approaches to ‘character’ and agency. Bertland argues that ‘virtue ethics, by emphasizing character rather than rules, helps train a person to act under the pressure that moral dilemmas bring forward’ (2009, 26). He turns to Aristotle to consider how virtue ethics can be applied in business, replacing Aristotle’s concept of ‘contemplation’ with ‘service’. This, he suggests, ‘replaces the goal of contemplation with the goal of fulfilling a role in a way that does good for the community’ (2009, 28). This proposes that if we respect a diversity of peoples and a diversity of ends (which is synergistic with the public interest, outlined above), the shift to service is necessary for business. Through this, the individual within the organisation carries out what Aristotle calls ‘*phronesis*’ – or ‘the ability to make reasonable decisions in situations in which there is no right answer’ (Desjardins, 1995, 97, in Maguire, 1997, 1412). *Phronesis* thus also aligns with public interest because it calls for the

application of understanding based on situation and principle rather than through any sort of formula (Maguire, 1997).

The strengths of agent-based virtue ethics therefore lie in enabling and extending virtue ethics in the workplace to individuals, beyond prescriptive behaviours. Harrison and Galloway (2005, 5) argue that: '[a]ction-based ethics asks whether a particular action is ethical, whereas agent-based ethics focuses on the individual agent's character and motivations and asks whether they are virtuous'. In their work on virtue ethics in public relations, they note how action-based ethics, as found in codes of ethics, are inherently limiting. Their views are widely supported, with others noting the shortfalls of codes of ethics, including their lack of capacity for anticipating situations, their simplistic nature, how they don't provide real solutions and how they are often poorly communicated (as with Enron, outlined below) or understood. In short, Blackburn and McPhee note: 'Codes typically have a low degree of precision' (2004, 98).

However, not everyone agrees that virtue ethics belong in business, because business can be inherently self-serving, rather than public-serving, precluding business from the service roles of professionals such as doctors and nurses (Blackburn and McGhee, 2004). Indeed, the so-called 'separation thesis' suggests that business and ethics are conceptually distinct and separate (Blackburn and McGhee, 2004). This is well illustrated in historical examples, with the failure of the corporate energy giant Enron providing a classic illustration of the separation thesis. Blackburn and McGhee (2004) explain: 'Enron had a code of ethics but it was only window dressing. Without implementing and communicating this code through their daily practice Enron's executives highlighted its abstractionist nature and hindered its overall usefulness' (2004, 95). While they partially ascribe the downfall of Enron to a marketing strategy that was prioritised over good practice, they highlight how the demise of the company could be attributed to the board and executives acting in a manner which was not conducive to public good (Blackburn and McGhee, 2004). Agent-based ethics are further criticised because character, values and virtue vary from person to person. This view sees virtue ethics as problematic both because of variances between practitioners' personal values and also how these ethics vary between groups and cultures (Harrison and Galloway, 2005). Moreover, Slote (2013) cautions about assuming that an agent who is usually virtuous is always virtuous.

Various models are proposed to manage this, one being a so-called 'capabilities approach' (Nussbaum, 2000) which calls for managers to encourage the capabilities of others within an organisation. In the Enron example, 'The capabilities approach would have an easy time showing that such a culture is morally flawed' (Bertland, 2009, 31). Other checks and balances include either bringing in a third party or *imagining* that a third party is monitoring the agent's ethics. In this approach a 'hypothetical third eye is introduced to judge the veracity of interest claims, thereby reinforcing the importance of greater accountability and openness to scrutiny' (Johnston, 2016, 172; see also Campbell and Marshall, 2002). This moral reflection occurs via 'an interlocutor', whether real or imagined (Sandel, 2009, 29). However, a typical rejection of this approach suggests that external regulation may simply make a professional person compliant rather than moral. While the normative position might hope that the virtuous professional will do the right thing naturally without internal battles or conflicts (Blackburn, 2003), the pragmatic approach is not so simple. Here, we can circle back to a pragmatic position of the public interest and its relationship to agent-based ethics, drawing on the work of policy maker Chris Wheeler (2018, 53):

there is more to acting in the public interest than doing the right thing once you have identified what the right thing is. This is only partly correct. In practice, it can be very difficult to do the right thing where the consequences are likely to be unwelcome. For

instance, arguing with senior managers or political masters comes at a personal and sometimes professional cost.

Nevertheless, he argues, despite these difficulties, the starting point must remain the same: 'Advancing this *principle* must come first. Dealing with practical complexities is a second order matter' (Wheeler, 2018, 53 italics added). Both these points then – the external arbiter or the potential for this; and understanding of the practical complexities that follow – shift the balance to a pragmatic framework. Pragmatism calls for the internal point of view and the third-party perspective to be consubstantial (Gonzalez and Kaufmann, 2012). In moving toward 'the concrete' (Bozeman, 2007, 13) and asking questions such as 'What must *I* or *we* do?' we find ourselves building a pragmatic approach to dealing with problems. Moreover, if we learn reflexively from history (e.g. Enron) and identify who and how people can be held to account for ethical and interest-based decisions, adjustments for the future can be made. As Huebner notes, in paraphrasing Mead, 'the past is always discovered in the present' (2016, 2).

The paper now turns to the next part of the framework for progressive communication action by examining how the sociological concept of 'public arenas of debate' provides the spaces needed for discourse, deliberation and debate.

Public arenas of debate

The field of pragmatic sociology provides us with an approach and a language to logically interface between the public interest and virtue ethics. Gonzalez and Kaufman (2009) say that through a pragmatic sociology approach:

people navigate plural and distinctive action frames, made of situational constraints, material arrangements, and above all, collective norms of qualification. Pragmatic sociology then focuses on the situated way people agree over a frame of reference, take hold of their environment, material as well as symbolic, and adjust their mode of engagement within the situation. (2009, 58).

Pragmatic sociology, led by French scholars (e.g. Cefaï, 2016; Gonzalez and Kaufmann, 2009) following the work of Dewey, Mead and Habermas, suggests that 'public arenas' unfold around problematic situations (Cefaï, 2016). In turn, individual or collective opinions develop through a process in which contradictory arguments are debated and confronted until the initial positions are either rejected, modified or supported (Badouard, Mabi and Monnoyer-Smith, 2016). 'This debating process is seen as necessary for citizens to be able to make choices upon which public policies can be developed which will influence collective destinies' (Badouard et al., 2016, para 1). However, rather than being abstract exchanges, public arenas are described as 'concrete social activities which take place in material spaces' (Badouard et al., 2016, para 2). These include public spaces (e.g. halls or lecture rooms), media (e.g. TV or newspaper), and 'third places' such as advertising and social media (Badouard et al., 2016). They include sites of protest, media platforms, public interest or action groups and other forms of deliberative action which require an audience to be part of the process.

Cefaï points out that the constitutive process of public arenas forms a continuous course of knowledge, and evaluations emerge based on what has been done and what will or can be done in the future (Cefaï, 2016). Although arenas are highly diverse in nature they share a number of characteristics: first, they are public, always in front of an audience that acts as both spectator and referee, led to make judgements about the relevance and authority of the arguments exchanged; second, discussion in these spaces makes validity claims which constitute 'regimes' of expression. These regimes include argument making, being understood

and providing personal experiences (Badouard et al., 2016). Here, we see similarities with Habermas's idea of 'validity claims' in his pragmatic analysis of argumentation. Drawing from this we could add a third characteristic in support of these regimes: reason-giving (see Habermas, 1962/1989; 1998).

Public arenas have been successful in providing space for public problems to be aired by members of civil society, forcing government agencies to take ownership of the problems. These include such issues as public garbage collection, city beautification, the creation of playgrounds and public baths, legislation relating to women and children and reform of the housing market. In dealing with these public problems, new laws, public services and public policies are created (Cefai, 2016).

This is also the space of 'public interest groups' – activists and other members of civil society who represent the plurality of participatory democracies. Schuck points out how these groups 'identify issues, mobilize political support, form alliances, bargain and accommodate, accumulate and expend political favours, and nurture their organizational base' (cited in Johnston 2016, 54). They do this by using arenas of debate, acting out their positions, potentially moving from arena to arena where the regime they use will be appreciated to a greater or lesser extent; in other words, where they will be heard, understood and appreciated. Thus, the materiality of spaces for discussion is affected by where speakers express themselves and, as debates circulate and are disseminated and reshaped according to each arena's possibilities and constraints, they will be affected by the power relationships within the arenas (Badouard et al., 2016).

Because the 'trajectory of public problems is not linear' (Badouard et al., 2016, para 24), neither are public arenas. There are crossing points in the organisation of public debates which unfold by bridging different public stages, constantly generating new connections and ideas between, for example, advertising, news media, the judiciary and political and scientific spaces (Cefai, 2016; Badouard et al., 2016). The public problem thus fluctuates with the degree of mobilisation of multiple actors and of the resonance it takes on with audiences, with different articulations of the problem challenging and answering each other, borrowing themes, resources and information (Cefai, 2016). Cefai thus calls this a *problem-centered democracy* in which pragmatic solutions are sought. Accordingly, the best way to learn about democracy as a way of life, and the public order on which it rests, is to observe situations that interrupt this delicate equilibrium, posing the following questions:

- How do new public problems make their way into the public experience?
- How can disorders turn into causes to defend, for which to fight?
- How do problematic situations lead to controversy? (Cefai, 2016).

In responding to these questions, we now move to an analysis of two case studies which illustrate public arenas at different points in time and place, each finding confluence with the three fields of theory just examined: The Torches of Freedom and the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

Two case studies: The Torches of Freedom and Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras

These two culturally-defining events illustrate the application of the theories examined in this paper and the discursive environments that drove change and underpinned their goals. Moreover, they share several key points in common. First, each reflects a dominant social condition and period of social change – the first wave of feminism in the first instance, the rise of LGBTQI+ rights in the second instance. Second, each was contextually driven, based

in the socially progressive milieu of the time, providing agency for minority groups within society. Third, each was considered a socially progressive event or campaign which had significant social, political and cultural impact. Finally, each was acted out through public arenas of debate, namely through public street marches/festivals, coupled with communication in many forms, including a highly mediated presence.

While differences between the two events are acknowledged and soon become apparent in the analysis, both events share a common theme of progressing a social change agenda which was centrally connected with consumerism in different ways. Each event has attracted significant scholarly attention that suggests how we might understand and manage future communication within the context of social problems, causes and change.

Torches of Freedom

The 1929 'Torches of Freedom' march in New York is a textbook example of a successful pseudo-event (Boorstin, 1961) which effectively used a stunt, public relations and media to advance a cause. While the event itself, as part of the 1929 New York Easter Parade, represents a flashpoint in feminist history, the march was part of a much wider social movement in the first wave of feminism. The 'Torches of Freedom', epitomised by women smoking in public (in the parade), not only positioned smoking as respectable but as 'sociable, fashionable, stylish, and feminine' (Amos and Hugland, 2000, 4). Amos and Hugland report that the First World War had been a watershed in the emancipation of women, with women taking on traditionally 'male' occupations, wearing trousers, cutting their hair and so on. Moreover, 'attitudes towards women smoking began to change, and more and more women started to use the cigarette as a weapon in their increasing challenge to traditional ideas about female behaviour' (Amos and Hugland, 2000, 4).

However, they question 'whether smoking would have become as popular among women as it did if tobacco companies had not seized on this opportunity in the 1920s and 1930s to exploit ideas of liberation, power, and other important values for women to recruit them to the cigarette market' (Amos and Hugland, 2000, 4). The importance, therefore, in advancing the social cause of women's liberation was centrally bound to how cigarettes were depicted as a 'symbol of rebellion, independence, and equality' (Craig, 1999, 2). The Torches of Freedom march, orchestrated by Edward Bernays, has therefore become emblematic of this shift in public consciousness.

The march represents a public arena of protest in which public and vested interests were placed on show and widely discussed and debated. Indeed, public arenas such as the march, the news media and advertising and publicity forums were clearly instrumental in the social change that followed. Bernays reportedly noted: 'Age-old customs, I learned, could be broken down by a dramatic appeal, disseminated by the network of media' (cited in Murphree, 2015, 266). It is important to note, too, that cigarettes were not the only consumable introduced to the Easter Parade; nor was the presentation of them the only stunt. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, James Barnett (1949) found a shift to consumerism more generally had 'hyped up' the Easter period in the United States. The parade was a part of this, along with feasting, gift giving, travel and vacations, most centring around women and children in particular. He wrote: 'Advertisers are well aware of powerful, cultural attitudes in this country which impute prestige to practices of conspicuous consumption, particularly in the case of women' (Barnett, 1949, 68). Among these were department stores, seen as a space that legitimised women being out of the home to exercise their growing expertise in consumerism (Maclaren, 2012). Department stores thus provided 'a new and anonymous public arena in which women could safely venture, one where it was seen as acceptable and respectable for them to visit unaccompanied by a male escort' (Maclaren, 2012, 463).

Yet the shift to public acceptance of women smoking on the street did not happen in a rush, nor did it occur uniformly. The era was ripe with contradictions and inconsistencies across laws and systems of social control. For example, Murphree (2015) notes how one newspaper, the *Bakersfield Californian*, reported at the time that ‘there is no taboo against women doing that very thing [smoking], on the street or elsewhere’ and another, the Iowa *Courier* noted how ‘No policeman today would think of interfering with a woman smoker on the street.’ Yet, only a few years beforehand, a bill had been proposed in the US Congress to ban women from smoking in the District of Columbia; and a decade earlier a woman was arrested for smoking a cigarette in public in New York (Amos and Hugland, 2000, 3).

The apparent paradox of the issue – seen in the simultaneous exploitation of the cause by Big Tobacco which also helped advance the feminist movement – is summed up by medical historian Allan Brandt. He notes ‘Bernays prized the power of the news media precisely because it hid the interests of the industry’ while at the same time, the publicity stunt ‘effectively united the symbol of the emancipated flapper with that of the committed suffragist’ (Brandt, 2007, 82, in Murphree, 2015, 265). The contradiction is identified by scholars who note how the parade ‘goes to the heart of debates between feminism and marketing: [but] is it exploitation or empowerment?’ (Maclaren, 2012, 462).

In considering how the tightly bound vested interests of the tobacco companies might be reconciled with the public interest advancement of feminism, Jane Mansbridge’s work on common good provides some insight. She argues against thinking of interests as binaries based around good and bad, private and public, because there can be relationships of congruity, contrast or compatibility across various interests. Where they may be compatible ‘one nests inside the other’ (1998, 17). This is further explained by the theory of ‘enlightened self-interest’ which sees civic virtues and self-interest as potentially compatible. First proposed by French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville in his observations of Americans in the 1830s, ‘enlightened self-interest’ suggests that a balance can be struck between individualism (self-interest) and common good (public interest). Allen (1998, 0) explains how de Tocqueville first encountered this in the American public when arriving in the United States from France:

Americans haphazardly employed a shallow, if admittedly pragmatic public philosophy, while also engaging themselves deeply in the civic demands of self-government. They imbued majority opinion with nearly religious significance, yet maintained institutions that depended on individual experimentation, innovation, and expression.

de Tocqueville called this ‘self-interest rightly understood’, representing both the desire to serve the general good and private actions in a kind of civic virtue that combined a disinterested concern for others with calculations of private welfare. Maitland argues for the need to get beyond the bifurcation of self-interest (which is seen as vicious or non-moral) and concern for others (which is virtuous), noting (perhaps surprisingly) that self-interest can be the principal force that checks itself. ‘Consequently, self-interest often coincides with and reinforces the commands of morality and promotes civility and consideration for others (Maitland, 2002, 3). Citing Adam Smith, he points to how some elements of human nature seek the fortune of others in this way, deriving ‘nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it’ (Smith, 1759 in Maitland, 2002, 7).

We now turn to the second festival, which represents a similar but different phenomenon. While it also combines a social change agenda with commercial imperatives (like the Torches of Freedom), it was not a one-off event. The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras has a long history of development, change and ongoing reflexivity.

Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (Mardi Gras) was first held in Sydney in 1978, marking forty-two years in 2020. Willett has outlined how it moved from a political movement to a 'market niche' positioned as 'not only one of the largest and flashiest displays of gay pride anywhere in the world, [but] also a major money maker for the city of Sydney and its businesspeople' (2000, 169). Internationally, the event is one of the most significant on the international LGBTQI+ calendar, identified for its economic impact, artistic accomplishment, support for social tolerance and grand scale (Kates, 2003).

Kates points to how parades such as Mardi Gras, as public celebrations, represent 'complex sites of contestation' (2003, 6). From its early days, the event has experienced internal struggles between the 'left' and 'right' of the gay liberation movement – the main point of contestation centring on whether or not Mardi Gras should be subject to the vagaries and demands of consumerism. Willett notes how 'in the view of the movement's radicals ... the interests of capitalism and of gay liberation were incompatible' (2000, 172). As such, for some, 'the question of how to work with commercial interests did not arise; the gay movement simply should not do so' (2000, 180). Consumerism brought criticism that the event engendered a homogenised perception of the gay rights movement and what it stood for, such that it represented 'a cooption of gay liberation into an amorphous gay community with its emphasis on maintaining a gay lifestyle rather than fighting for gay rights' (Sixth National Conference for Lesbians and Homosexual Men, Unpublished Resolutions 1980, cited in Willett 2000, 180). In short, the community focus of Mardi Gras was said to undermine the very reason it began as a protest in the first place.

Over time, within the subculture as well as externally within the broader society, shifts in thinking occurred. The shift of emphasis from the gay 'movement' of the seventies to the gay 'community' in the eighties soon aligned with a focus on unity and political credibility (Willett, 2000). Public spaces (both physical and mediated) emerged and were embedded into the mainstream.

Lesbians and gay men built and entered into a community – a complex network of media (weekly newspapers, community radio and television programs, publishers), businesses (professional services, tradespeople, restaurants, bars, sex-venues), political and cultural organizations run by and for lesbians and gay men. (Willett, 2000, 183)

Within the broader Sydney society, the gay and lesbian community was thus 'granted its place within the multicultural society that Australia had become, jostling cosily with the other ethnic and market-niche communities for media attention, political influence and advertisers' dollars' (Willett, 2000, 183). As such, an ambivalence grew, stemming from the intersections of the claiming of space through the parade and the fiscal desires of the mainstream economy (Markwell and Waitt, 2009). Emblematic of its cultural shift was the move of the festival from June – where it marked the historic US gay-rights Stonewall Day riots – to February/March. The move to the Southern Hemisphere summer was more conducive to an outdoors festival atmosphere, positioning it as a mainstream, commercial tourism event. In light of this, the number of people attracted to the festival soared. Prior to the change of date, the participants and onlookers averaged around 1,500–2,000; by 1987, the crowd was estimated to be 100,000; and by 1994 it had peaked at around 600,000 (Markwell and Waitt, 2009).

Culturally, the festival presented then, as now, a multiplicity of narratives about sexuality, 'generated through the negotiation of sense of self through the points of connections made possible' by the event (Markwell and Waitt, 2009, 163). For the participants and onlookers, Mardi Gras became symbolic of a highly visible and participatory 'mélange of cultural

meanings' (Kates, 2003, 7). As such, it emerged as a public arena which contributed enormously to debates about sexuality and the remaking of social worlds (Markwell and Waitt, 2009). Kates points out that the meanings of festivals evolve over time: 'sometimes politically charged and rebellious, sometimes commercialized and "corporate" but usually existing in a dialectic tension, reflecting the morass of social conditions and political agendas in which the festival itself is embedded' (2003, 8).

And this dialectic tension continues. In 2020 Mardi Gras is *highly* corporatised and mediated. It is a registered corporation under the NSW Corporation Act 2001, with an undeniable corporate-like quality, including annual reports dating back to 2004 and a strategic plan (2018–19 to 2020–2021) which includes its vision, values, goals and six strategic priorities (SGLMG, 2019). Its sponsors read like a Who's Who of Australian and international business and politics, including the ANZ bank, the NSW Government, the city of Sydney, the Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), Myer, Google and Amazon. In 2020 it was also broadcast live on national (commercial) television for the first time (SGLMG, 2020).

But while the commercialism and media has ramped up, so too have the event's key messages that resonate with its past. In 2020 the festival took a shift back to the parade's political roots with a 'powerful nod to the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras' history of activism and protest' (Leighton-Dore, 2020). The theme for 2020 – 'WHAT MATTERS' – was intended to encourage party-goers to reflect on and examine not only how far members of the Australian LGBTQI+ community had come, but how much further it had to go. Event organisers (re) embedded the festival's journey, the protest and the heroes of the movement into their key messaging of diversity, inclusion and social justice (Leighton-Dore, 2020). How this represents an ongoing re-negotiation of priorities between the tensions of international exposure via corporate success and the original and ongoing value base of the event is discussed in the lessons learnt, which now follow.

Lessons learnt: Virtue ethics, public interest and arenas of debate

Unlike the Torches of Freedom march, which was a one-off event within the 1929 Easter march, Mardi Gras did not occur at a single flashpoint in history. Rather, it has had an extensive history which parallels the gay rights movement over more than four decades. Yet, despite the differences between the two festivals, both present some pragmatic approaches for dealing with social, cultural or political causes or problems of their times. In turn, these can assist communication professionals in dealing with problems and progressing causes, to stimulate advances in the field, and to provide pragmatic responses (and sometimes solutions) to complex and contested issues.

First: taking a pragmatic approach to public interest

Public interest is always contextually formed, positioned in a liminal place in time, changing with social mores, public attitudes, laws and cultural norms. These two events provide separate, but equally cogent insights for working through the theory and in examining how 'public-interest forming practices' (Johnston and Pieczka, 2018) occurred within public arenas of debate. In the Torches of Freedom, questions of empowerment vs exploitation can be considered using a pragmatic approach to looking at the past from the present. As Maclaren points out, the iterative relationship is something we can best appreciate with historic contextualisation. From the pragmatic sociology perspective: 'Far from being caught in a unified, highly integrated cultural and social system, people navigate plural and distinctive action frames, made of situational constraints, material arrangements, and above all, collective norms of qualification' (Gonzalez and Kaufmann, 2012, 58). Therefore, looking back from almost 100 years later, the historical lens allows a reflexive approach, one that can see the

achievements of Torches of Freedom within the time-frame in which they were presented. As such, while the event saw a form of 'separation thesis' between ethics and business imperatives (Blackburn and McGhee, 2004) it was also infused with a 'capabilities approach' of empowering women (Nussbaum, 2000).

Historically, Mardi Gras presents a very different illustration due to its continued existence over forty-two years, having undergone various changes in terms of its concomitant social, political and consumer priorities. This has seen the event in an almost permanent state of reflection and re-evaluation as Mardi Gras has been vigorously and regularly debated, with a central focus on the tension between the political, commercial and celebratory dimensions (Markwell, 2002). In 2017, one participant noted: 'the big push this year is trans-inclusivity and creating equality within the community. To bring the T in line with the LGBT'. The event's continued success must therefore continue to balance its historic and future aims and different stakeholder needs, in a constant (re)negotiation of its *raison d'être*. Among this ongoing but often productive tension, Mardi Gras will need to continually provide 'reason-giving' for its decision making (Habermas, 1962/1989a), working within a framework of 'enlightened self-interest' (Allen, 1998).

Second: events and media as public arenas of debate

Public places – on the street, via parades or marches, and mediated through news and advertising – saw the Torches of Freedom and Mardi Gras amplified in many and significant ways. Both events are associated with public physical spaces, in the middle of major international cities, with each also highly mediated to a wider community. Boorstin (1961, 10) highlights the media aspect of events in this way: 'It is the [media] report that gives the event its force in the minds of potential customers. The power to make a reportable event is thus the power to make experience'. On the streets, the parades attracted (and continue to attract in Mardi Gras) hundreds of thousands of onlookers, creating a carnival-like fanfare. Calendar timing was crucial for public turnout to provide the physicality of the public arenas: Easter for the Torches of Freedom and summer for the sexualised Mardi Gras Parade. Moreover, the stakeholders that were central to the two festivals – women in 1929 and the LGBTQI+ community in Mardi Gras – also found other arenas that underpinned their place in the world. Where department stores were acknowledged to be a physical space in which women could feel safe and independent in the 1920s (Maclaren, 2012), LGBTQI+ cultures took to bars, restaurants and new, heavily gay residential areas in Sydney (Willett, 2000). In this way, the public arenas became what Cefaï described as places to exercise '*rites and myths*' (2016, para 46, his italics), with their constitutive process both coming from the public exchange and discussion, plus institutional, legal and political ecologies in which they were situated.

Third, incorporating virtue ethics with consumerism

On first blush, virtue ethics and consumerism may appear to be unlikely bedfellows, but the economic imperative of any sustained activity cannot preclude their co-existence. In both events this was central to striking a balance across interests and values of many and diverse stakeholders, including the fiscal realities of running a corporation or financing an event. If we return to our earlier discussion on virtue ethics, and the focus on the agent, virtue ethics can be further explained as the agent's inward gaze effectively 'doubling back' on the world, allowing the agent to take facts about the issue and the world into account in determining what is morally acceptable or best to do (Slote, 2013, 661). Blackburn (2003) ties this to the professions, arguing that moral virtue must go beyond the action of the professional and attach to the values of society as a whole, both providing (to self) and presenting (to others)

a legitimate voice. 'Good professions ... are those which by their existence contribute in an important way to human good. It is not sufficient to take for granted the norms of a profession. Rather it must be shown that they reflect an important human value or values' (2003, 6). In turn, the value of linking professional status to Aristotle's concept of human flourishing 'fits well with a core claim made by all professions i.e. that they contribute something worthwhile to society' (Blackburn, 2003, 6).

Conclusions

Each of these themes provide separate but intertwined lessons from the Torches of Freedom and Mardi Gras. Combined, the theories and illustrations in this article provide a practical architecture for developing a pragmatic approach to the use of public interest communication (Johnston and Pieczka, 2018), by combining core elements of public interest (context, time-based, process-driven); virtue ethics (agent-based, professionally-embedded); and public arenas (places, both physical and mediated, to act out debate).

An overarching lesson to take from this analysis is the limited use binaries present, for example: social change vs consumerism; public interest vs vested interests; agent-based ethics vs action-based; and so on. Evolving theories, such as enlightened self-interest, and those that are well advanced, such as virtue ethics and pragmatism, illustrate the need for the negotiation of interests and the potential for special interests to coalesce with public interests. This view presupposes a rejection of the idea that the public interest can serve any totality of 'the public'; rather, it is a mechanism through which pluralism is acted out via the public arenas that let it take shape in what Johnston and Pieczka call public-interest forming practices (2018). As such, the process of deliberation and debate is given oxygen in public forums where it is contextually driven and historically understood in the pragmatic tradition. If we return here to Dewey: 'flux does not have to be created. But it does have to be directed' (2000, 61). And since flux is itself always in a state of change, this direction requires ongoing commitment by the communication industries involved to muster and combine their best tools of reflexivity, ethics and agility in managing the challenges going forward.

Another lesson to take from this analysis is the pragmatic view that knowledge emerges as a product of its time, created through individual and collective reflexivity, within cultures of exchange, but often remaining in dialectical tension. Accordingly, the benefit of historical enquiry provides a way to understand the social changes, forces and interests of problems and events 'that were not present in the conscious experience of the members of the community at the time' but emerged later (Mead, 2015 256 in Huebner, 2016, 12). Thus, the framework for communication industries working for human good can take a pragmatic route through virtue ethics and public interest communication which sees human good as 'a living tradition [whose] influences on members of the community will change over time' (Maguire, 1997, 1417).

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Image thumbnail [cropped]: Marcello Vicidomini/Wikimedia Commons.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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