

Towards a Theory of Middleness For Public Relations

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to propose a theory of middleness for public relations.

The theory is derived from French philosopher Regis Debray's work on *mediologie*

It is stimulated by Heath's (2010, p. 709) sense that PR is still 'searching for its centre' and Ihlen & Verhoeven's (2012) suggestion that research should address 'how public relations work and what it does.'

Literature Review:

Application of Philosophical Ideas to PR

Heath and Toth (1992) drew on philosophy in *Rhetorical and critical approaches to public relations* and Ihlen et al (2009) engaged with sociology, philosophy and other disciplines in considering public relations .

Edwards (2009) successfully applied elements of Pierre Bourdieu's work on symbolic power to public relations practice.

Edwards later proposed that PR was a 'purposive flow of communication on behalf of individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups.' (2012, p. 22).

Regis Debray and *Mediologie*



Regis Debray and Mediologie

Mediologie is not a new field nor a new discipline.

Debray asserts it is an 'inter-discipline' that seeks and defines what has been missed or what is in the middle.

It is an approach to finding what is 'in-between,' that forms the elements of transmission.

Debray distinguishes between the act of communication and the labour of transmission.

Transmission is a transfer of cultural meaning through the elements of transmission - language, symbols and images – predominantly over the long term.

Regis Debray and Mediologie

The social elements of mediology are concerned with the institutions of transmission .

Depending on context, these may be libraries, churches, newspapers, universities or advertising and PR firms .

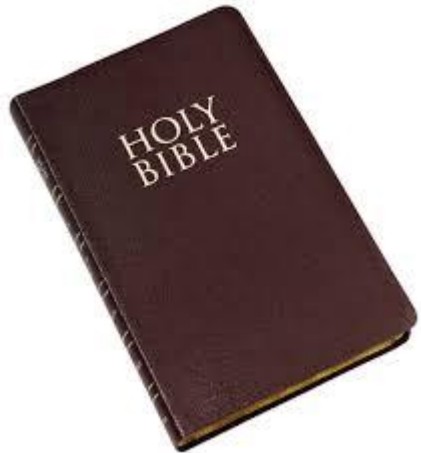
Effects of elements of transmission over time are how an idea becomes a cultural force.

‘It is highly unlikely that a communications major or the holder of an advanced degree in communications arts will have studied the origins and formation of the West’s most popular religion.

But anyone curious enough to adopt a mediological approach and follow the propagation of the “true faith” across its first few centuries will have also gleaned in passing some insight into information societies in the year 2000.’

(Debray, 2000, p. 8)

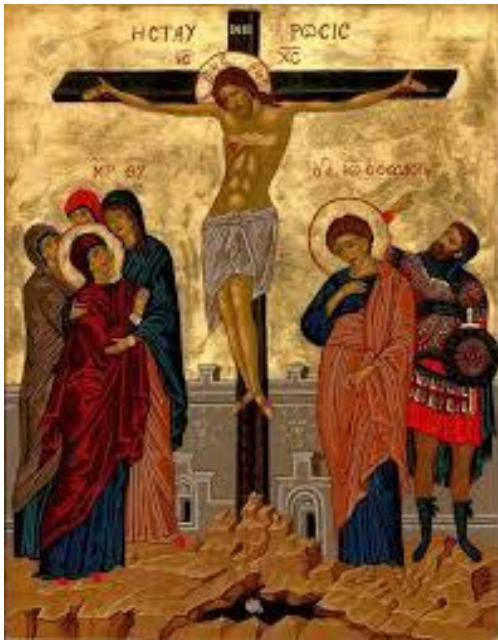
Elements of transmission: Idea or product and associated symbols



Elements of transmission: Sense-making narrative and/or individual story



Elements of transmission: Artefacts and cultural intensifiers



Elements of transmission: Artefacts and cultural intensifiers



Mediologie and Public Relations

Mediologie is a powerful conceptual framework for a theory of middleness.

This approach confronts the abstract interregnum of public relations practice rather than assuming ubiquity.

Instead of being at the centre of society or business, public relations is in the middle, between a duality of matched pairs, which express themselves as gaps as well as questions for practitioners.

- Public relation as a profession or an industry?
- Public relations in a media school or business school?
- Public relations for clients or for the media?
- Public relations for corporate or activist interests?

PR is not both nor does it own either as territory, but it is a network link across all.

Mediologie and Public Relations

A post-structuralist theoretical approach suggests rich meaning in gaps.

A theory of middleness suggests that public relations is in between.

A theory of middleness states that public relations is not everywhere but can be a component of transmission in the middle of many societal, media and economic mediations.

Public relations is part of a network of transmission in society not a territory.

A theory of middleness suggests that Robert Heath's (2010) 'centre' of public relations will be elusive object of search.

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