

# Insight: PR in a Pluralistic society

A global cultural shift identified by sociologists opens the door for previously ignored minorities to have a voice in the public conversation. Public authorities can seize the opportunity to engage better, and minority groups can gain influence. However, both minority groups and established authorities must learn the 'new rules' if they are to successfully navigate the new situation.



## Background

Since 1999, Peter Berger, Jürgen Habermas and other leading sociologists have identified that we are entering an era of 'post-secularism', which changes the relationship between the state and minority groups. Initially this was examined in terms of the relationship between religion and the state, but, as thinking has developed, we are now able to talk about a pluralism which benefits all minority voices.

## What is pluralism?

Pluralism is when everyone is able to make their case in the marketplace of ideas. This is distinct from the Enlightenment notion of 'the court of reason', where a self- or state-proclaimed arbiter chose between the merits of different voices. In a marketplace of ideas, everyone has the right to set up their stall, and they do not need to defend their idea or demonstrate that it is superior to anyone else's.

## How is this 'post-secular'?

'Secularisation' has often been used as a shorthand for 'the inevitable decline of religion', but in its technical sense it concerned the rise of the nation-state as a body answerable only to itself. The state 'owned' the table, and was able to invite and exclude whomever it wished from the public conversation. In practice, this applied not just to the state, in the sense of the government, but to every layer of officialdom. In the UK, this included education, the health service, transport, water, and even quasi-official bodies such as the CBI and the CIPR.

Partly because of the rise of the internet, and also for other reasons, non-state players now loom large: Apple's budget is bigger than that of Denmark, Facebook has more influence over US elections than alleged interference by foreign governments, the World Health Organisation calls the tune for Covid, post-EU Britain finds itself bound by the World Trade Organisation rules, and, within the EU, Poland struggles to reconcile its ideas on the judiciary with those mandated by the European Convention.

This applies inside the state as well. For example, health leaders in Birmingham discovered they were able to substantially increase uptake of vaccinations when they actively engaged with black-majority churches, mosques and temples. The similarly sized and profiled city of Brussels engaged only with religious groups formally registered with and recognised by the state. Without Birmingham-style engagement, Brussels vaccination levels continued to hover around the 50%, and minority ethnic groups were the least likely to take up vaccination opportunities.

## Is this the return of religious 'fundamentalism'?

Post-secularism is not a return to the 'sacral' era which preceded secularism. It is not restoring the rights of an established religion to exclusive access to the state. Rather, it is the point at which religions – and other minority voices – the state and society become distinct: religion does not own society in a post-secular world, but neither does the state.

Incidentally, the term 'fundamentalist' belongs to the secular era, not to the post-secular: it's an example of the state making a judgement about which religious movements are acceptable, and which are not.

## Has everything changed?

Covid-19 has substantially moved matters forwards, but social changes of this kind take place gradually, and conversations can shift from one mode of thinking ('the court of reason') to another ('the marketplace of ideas') simply because of the way people choose to act and the vocabulary used. Public authorities can discover, by poor choice of words or format of meeting, that previously engaged minority groups abruptly break off. Minorities which have developed constructive dialogues with public authorities can find the door suddenly closed, without explanation.



## Where does PR come in?

Although the change has been identified by sociologists, it is the public relations function which acts as the midwife, mediator and catalyst in this engagement.

From the side of public authorities, it is the PR/Comms function which generally seeks to engage with public audiences. In most public bodies, 'hard to reach' groups are always high on the agenda, but solutions have often been little better than 'have more diversity on the poster' or 'hire a minority person to engage with the minorities'. Such aspects of tokenism are easily spotted, and widely derided.

For minority voices – not simply religious minorities, but any minority which has struggled to get a place at the table – PR teams have often focussed on creating programmes, events and situations to which they can invite representatives of public bodies. Success in terms of policy change on a particular issue or long-term access to the public conversation has typically been limited.

### The 'old' public conversation

In a secularisation-era public conversation, the 'official' body would invite delegates to the public meeting. Even when the general public were invited, most speakers would begin by stating who they represented. Chairs of such meetings were particularly alert to three kinds of problem contributors:

- **Invaders:** individuals or groups whose intention was to take over the meeting for their own purposes, especially those who had no 'right' to be present (based on the chair's notion of 'right')
- **Obsessives:** people who only had one issue, and tried to bring it into any meeting and argue on issues irrelevant to the meeting
- **Divisives:** people looking to start a dispute on an issue within their own minority sphere (or what appeared to be their sphere to the chair).

Equally, attendees at such meetings were alert to signs that the meeting was not worth their time:

- **Tokenism:** invitation to the meeting was to fulfil a quota, not for true engagement
- **Selective listening:** even when space was given in the meeting, only contributions that supported the goals of the organisers found their way into the minutes
- **False representation:** someone not from their group, community or perspective contributed 'on their behalf' but without their permission or agreement.

### Reframing the conversation

'New' conversations in the pluralistic framework require the contributors to recognise that they are making their case in the marketplace of ideas, but they have no guarantee of an audience. Equally, the host must recognise that they are ceding their position as 'owner' of the table, and simply become one of many voices. If a moderator is needed, they should not contribute to the conversation, but only to the ordering of business.

In many cases, the new conversation is held over a period of days or weeks on social media, rather than in the formal setting of the 'town hall' type meeting.



Contributors need to observe three simple rules:

### 1 Begin by stating perspective

By stating their own perspective, a contributor can position themselves as 'helpful expert' rather than 'unwelcome invader'. Stating perspective, such as 'speaking as a dog owner in Stratford', rather than a claiming a position 'I'm here to represent dog owners in Stratford' is a key nuance.

### 2 Be relevant, useful and interesting

Applying the speaker's own perspective to the matter at hand establishes the role of 'helpful expert'. It can also open doors later to discussing issues which are more central to their interest. It is the content, not the status of the speaker, which will persuade.

### 3 Announce, do not denounce

Minority groups are free, in a marketplace of ideas, to promote their interests and belief systems, but they are not free to denounce other stallholders in the marketplace.

These rules apply equally to public authorities: their critical need is to recognise that have the same status as other contributors.

Failure to keep to the rules might result in censure by a moderator (especially rule 3), but it is more likely and more quickly likely to result in the audience losing interest and moving away.

## And if we don't wish to change?

Both public authorities and voices for minority groups may have a vested interest in the secular-era, pre-social media, conversation. To the public authority, it presents a surer way to achieve its goals, since it can determine who speaks and whose words are recorded. To individuals who have learned to navigate the system, and who have established themselves as 'the' voice of particular group, the hard-won status may be only reluctantly abandoned.

However, the flat nature of social media and the virality of strong ideas makes this a recipe for irrelevance. This was dramatically illustrated when the then-president of the USA was stripped of his rights to post on the major social media platforms for (effectively) violations of rules 2 and 3. Equally, the success of the #metoo movement demonstrates that it is now your voice, more than your vote, that counts.

Old	New
The court of reason	The marketplace of ideas
Officialdom 'owns' the table	Every voice is an equal contributor
"I represent"...	"From my perspective as..."
Status gives privileged access	No one is guaranteed an audience
"Out" groups may be freely criticised by "in" groups	Groups are free to positively make their case, but not to attack others.



## Expert voices?

In the Covid crisis, we are particularly aware of the ability of people who have mastered the new rules to make their voices heard, even when that is detrimental to public health. A conversation running 'I'm just a mum, but from my perspective, you have to do your own research. I don't want to criticise anyone else, but, for me, I don't want anyone experimenting on my children' is hard to resist, even though, on reflection, the notion of 'just a mum' conducting massive double-blind experiments is implausible.

Part of the issue is that experts have traditionally been introduced based on their status not their perspective. 'The Chief Medical Officer' is a persuasive title in the old paradigm, but in the new it is far better to introduce him as 'Chris has worked as a doctor in the UK, Africa and Asia and is currently a practising consultant physician at University College Hospitals, London', or, when introducing himself 'I'm a UK doctor and I've worked in Africa and Asia, and from my perspective...'

It is at the point of the strength of the idea—being relevant, useful and interesting—that expertise gains its value.

## Summing up

Pluralism is already here, and it isn't going away. While some social media sites have become a wild-west of aggressive comment, better sites (which then gain in Google rankings) have created systems for managing the conversation, almost all of which depend on user-reporting rather than active chairing.

In public consultations, or public engagement during Covid or other crises, authorities still retain the ability to own the table, but they do so at the risk of alienating the communities which they most need to engage. They may be ignoring warning voices until it is far too late to remedy the situation.

For minority groups, pluralism opens many doors, but they must be careful to navigate correctly, and may need to gently educate public bodies about how engagement can better take place.

