Weathering the storm: Hauser’s Vernacular Voices, public relations and the Roman Catholic Church’s sexual abuse scandal

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Received 29 November 2004; received in revised form 13 January 2005; accepted 1 February 2005

Abstract

Since 2002, the Roman Catholic sexual abuse scandal has had disastrous and far-reaching effects on both the church’s ability to interact with its internal publics and its ability to pursue its public agenda. This paper blends the author’s experience as a public relations practitioner in the Roman Catholic Church with Gerard Hauser’s theory of publics and public spheres articulated in Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres to discover how organizations could improve their responses to crises.

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Keywords: Catholic Church; Crisis communications; Gerard Hauser; Jurgen Habermas; Vernacular voices; Abuse scandal

One morning in winter 2002, I awoke to an NPR story in which Boston’s Cardinal Bernard Law was apologizing about a sexual abuse case I had never heard of. As a public relations practitioner for a large Catholic diocese, I listened intently, though at the time, I had no idea where it would lead.

Law was discussing Fr. John Geoghan, who would eventually face some 200 accusations of child sexual abuse. As the scandal mushroomed, and scores of priests across the country – 90 in Boston alone – stood accused of sexual abuse (Globe, 2002), I found myself in the eye of perhaps the greatest public relations crisis an American religious institution has ever weathered.

The scandal produced 6 months of turmoil and absolutely brutal publicity that left in its wake a betrayed laity, a demoralized priesthood, and a church with an incredibly damaged public presence. “We are lay people; we are priests; we are religious,” Mona Villarrubia (2002) wrote in the Jesuit magazine America.
“We are practicing Catholics; we are ex-Catholics. All of us are hurting, and none of us can forget” (p. 18).

Now that the clouds have parted, communicators of all types probably have their own ideas about how the scandal should have been handled. Alongside their insight, I apply Gerard Hauser’s (1999) work on public discourse to the scandal and argue that his understanding of “vernacular voices” opens a new perspective on public relations that could help organizations weather storms threatening to consume them.

1. Foundations

In this paper, I put the rhetorical literature on publics into dialogue with my experience in the communications office of a large Roman Catholic diocese in a medium-sized mid-Atlantic city. This paper is not a tactical essay (though its conclusions have practical implications), nor is it another critique of the church (though obviously some critique of the church’s response will occur). Instead, it hopes to show how taking a different perspective on the publics practitioners engage could improve their approach to their work.

Though the uncertainty, the sense of betrayal, and the embarrassment may have been similar to other public relations crises, the clergy sex scandal was no average crisis. The gravity of the crimes, the depth of the mismanagement, and the outrage often left one speechless. The scandal was also incredibly complex. As Philip Jenkins (1996) has observed, sexual misconduct in the Catholic priesthood is a sociological, psychological, legal, theological, and ethical issue framed as much by anti-Catholicism and ideological disagreements with Catholic doctrine as by legitimate concerns over the safety of children.

The clergy sex scandal was something of a public relations “perfect storm.” In the exploration that follows, I will use Gerard Hauser’s work on the public sphere and “vernacular publics” to suggest a new perspective on public relations that could help institutions facing similar problems.

2. Hauser and Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere

Gerard Hauser’s contribution to the literature on public discourse must be understood in relation to Jürgen Habermas’s (1962/1989) seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In that work, Habermas discusses the discourse of middle class intellectuals in the coffeehouses and salons of Enlightenment Europe. Whether it was art, literature, or politics, Habermas contends, the coffeehouse debates of this “bourgeois public sphere” were distinguished by their rationality and critical detachment and, as such, were essential to the Enlightenment project of liberating humanity and creating a just moral order. For Habermas, though, these halcyon days of critical discourse were short-lived. Marxism, liberalism, and the expanding power of the state and commercial media, he argues, weakened the public sphere into a passive, mediatized culture of consumption that readily accepted the soporific manipulations of the elite.

In reading Habermas, it becomes clear that he is not only theorizing about publics but also casting the participants of public discourse into particular roles. As many have noted, Habermas’ bourgeois public acts as a rational inquisitor of political power, a heroic critical public fighting for truth and justice (Burleson & Kline, 1979; Cushman & Dietrich, 1979; Francesconi, 1986; Mayhew, 1997). Every hero must have a villain, and for Habermas, the state and bureaucratic institutions fit the bill. With the rise of the bourgeois public, their once secret dealings would be pulled into public view to be made “the target
of critical public opinion," challenged, and rendered legitimate—by rhetorical force, if necessary (p. 62). The institution is, at best, a passive target for the heroic public’s rational-critical discourse; at worst, it is a dissembling oppressor.

In valorizing critical confrontation and debate, Habermas’s tragic melodrama of the bourgeois public sphere characterizes not only the participants of public discourse but also the way he believes interactions between the state and its people should occur in a democracy. Armed with their reason and their capacity to debate matters of public concern, Habermas’s heroic bourgeois public challenges evasive institutions and calls them to accountability.

3. Implications of Habermas’ account

Since it first appeared in 1962, Habermas’ *Structural Transformation* has captivated the imagination of scholars and activists, particularly on the left. Neil Postman’s (1984) critique of postmodern entertainment culture, for instance, echoes various aspects of Habermas’s account. Nevertheless, Habermas’s vision is bleak, and even his supporters recognize that rehabilitating the critical public discourse he desires is nearly impossible. “The Enlightenment project,” one writes, “of which Habermas’s work on the public sphere is a part, expresses a tragic, not a utopian, vision” (Garnham, 1992). In reading these scholars, one is impressed by how fragile rational-critical discourse is and how dim the prospects of democracy seem to be.

Nevertheless, Habermas’s theory and its applicability to American public discourse have not gone uncontested. Scholars have argued that his distinction between public and private is exclusionary (Fraser, 1989, 1992; Ku, 2000), that his public sphere presupposes a consensus that inherently excludes dissent (Phillips, 1996), and that he obscures other public spheres (Fraser, 1992; Hardt, 1996). Others have even questioned whether Habermas’s public sphere ever existed in American society at all (Schudson, 1992).

The Boston scandal both confirmed and belied Habermas’s account. The scandal awakened a variety of critical publics and intellectuals from all sides of the ideological spectrum, from advocates of women’s ordination and gay rights on the left to radical conservative groups, who believed that the scandal was the result of the weak ecclesiastical discipline and lax sexual ethics resulting from Vatican II (see Jenkins, 1996; National Review Board, 2004). In the face of this critical publicity, the church, particularly in Boston, played the role of the reluctant institution, relinquishing its secret files only when the public outcry was so loud it could not be avoided. In the end, the critical publicity forced the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to adopt a policy in June 2002 strict enough to appease a majority of people. From this angle, the public sphere worked as Habermas suggested it should.

Yet, even though the bishops made efforts to show sensitivity through closed-door meetings with victims and plenary sessions featuring dissenting voices, the direct, critical debate Habermas’ model requires was absent. The bishops listened to victims and critics, but they did not respond to their critical publics directly, arguing instead with each other and maintaining a firm grip over the agenda. The result was a compromise some critics still condemn (Callahan, 2002).

Even worse, the struggle between the church and its critical publics cost them all over 6 months of searing publicity in almost every venue possible. The critical Catholic publics who wrested concessions must worship in a church with a demoralized priesthood and adhere to a tradition that is once again viewed as odd, out-of-touch, and inappropriate for contemporary society (Cozzens, 2002). Even if one can describe their efforts as victorious, the victory was Pyrrhic.
Had the church capitulated and opened itself to critical publicity, some suggest, it would have avoided the scandal’s destructiveness (Callahan, 2002; National Review Board, 2004; Wirth, 2002). I do not dispute that the secrecy and independence of Catholic clerical culture was the major reason why the scandal was as bad as it was. Nevertheless, as angry masses assembled outside the Boston chancery and intellectuals appropriated the scandal to pursue their agendas on editorial pages across the country, it is easy to see how church leaders, many of whom feel the stings of anti-Catholicism in what they understand to be an increasingly secular and aggressive media culture, could become defensive.

The bishops’ reluctance in the face of critical publicity is understandable, and they are not alone. When frightened with the possibility of critical publicity, institutions often seek solace in public relations professionals like Edward Bernays, who assure them that their peccadilloes will go unnoticed (Ewen, 1998). In the end, Habermas’ critical publics and public relations professionals are playing the same game from opposite sides. One demands a public sphere of agonistic critical publicity, while the other uses public relations techniques to evade that critical publicity. Yet, as the church abuse scandal shows, it is a most dangerous game.

4. The contribution of Hauser’s Vernacular Voices

The public relations struggle can lead to a practical impasse. As the clergy sexual abuse scandal shows, the struggle can easily reach the discursive equivalent of trench warfare, an angry critical public on one side and evasive leaders on the other. In the church’s case, the casualty was the institution both sides loved.

Gerard Hauser’s Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres (1999) speaks to this problem by suggesting that both Habermas and public relations professionals rely on a simplistic understanding of what a public is and how it participates in public discourse. Indeed, though he owes much to Habermas, his work resounds with the notion that publics are far more complex than we often suppose and that they speak with far more subtle voices than we often allow.

Hauser’s focus is on political discourse, but his definitions of publics and public spheres offer insights for public relations theory as well. “A public,” Hauser says, refers to “the interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse” (p. 32, emphasis his). At the same time, “a public sphere,” he says, “may be defined as a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them. It is the locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meanings” (p. 61, emphasis his).

Hauser’s definition of a public foregrounds difference and interdependence. Hauser’s publics are incredibly diverse and “reticulate,” joined together by a myriad of formal and informal ties and arising less from demographic categories than from shared rhetorical ends (p. 71). Just as both ultraconservative Catholics and the Catholic left simultaneously bristled with critiques of the church hierarchy, Hauser’s publics emerge when groups, often with wildly differing perspectives, come together to deal with mutually important problems and break apart as those problems are addressed or fade.

Hauser’s definition of public spheres foregrounds meaning and mutual understanding instead of conflict and legitimation. In the public sphere, Hauser believes, “common understanding supplants warranted assent as the communicative norm for achieving mutual cooperation and toleration” (p. 55, emphasis
Like Bitzer (1978), Goodnight (1982), and Weal (1985), Hauser argues that the public sphere is primarily a place where social knowledge is created and sustained. In Hauser’s reticulate public sphere, where publics come together in complex, often unpredictable ways, the rational-critical publicity and formal debate Habermasvalorizes are only part of a much larger, evolving conversation.

Hauser’s conversation speaks in a different, more complex voice. In a culture where the discourse of media elites and public intellectuals seems to be the only discourse that really matters, Hauser’s work attempts to understand the public value of the discourse of parking lots, shopping malls, and workplaces. “Quite apart from our interactions on a particular issue,” he argues, “our daily conversations with coworkers, neighbors, superiors, subordinates, community and church contacts, group members, friends, and family provide countless opportunities to exchange views on public matters” (p. 65). Our public discourse emerges in vernacular, not simply elite, voices.

In this, Hauser offers a stunningly complex vision of public discourse. Even in the absence of formal public forums, Hauser sees public discourse occurring every day. Actions by leaders, pundits, and pressure groups, he says, are “read” by various publics and subsequently “understood, discussed, supported, and responded to by those who [are] actively engaged by an issue” (pp. 276–277). In Hauser’s view, publics interact by debating their leaders’ statements, like neglected children discussing the actions of the adults who ignore them. Publics generate meanings whether their leaders intend it or not, and it is up to leaders to find ways to listen.

Hauser’s emphasis on vernacular discourse in shaping public sentiment leads him to argue that because vernacular discourse is naturally occurring, public conversations are naturally occurring as well. In making such a claim, though, Hauser’s work suggests a second, and more revolutionary, possibility: Publics are not dead: communicators are just not listing to them. Instead of bewailing the death of rational-critical publics or looking at the masses as dupes for manipulation, Hauser believes that public communicators must rediscover ways to understand the discourse that is already going on and interact with it as it is. In Hauser’s conception, publics and public discourse generate shared meanings, and leaders and communicators must interact with that discourse and to participate in it. Though his perspective allows for legitimation and confrontation, it allows for cooperation as well.

A practical interpretation of his model suggests that leaders like Cardinal Law, particularly in times of crisis, need to change their perspective on publics and public relations if their organizations are to survive. Instead of seeing critical publics as a riotous mob (or as ungrateful, angry children), Hauser’s work suggests that leaders should see publics as potential partners. By respecting, understanding, and cooperating with their publics and the considerable power they wield, leaders can ask publics to respect, understand, and cooperate with them in return. Hauser’s model suggests that leaders should want to hear the publics they have so long ignored or sought to control.

5. Hauser’s perspective and public relations practice

In foregrounding meaning and interaction, Hauser suggests a theory of public relations that emphasizes the management of ambiguity and meaning, as opposed to control, power, and brand identity. Such a perspective seems particularly useful in public relations situations where ambiguity is considerable and stakes are high.

In the later chapters of Vernacular Voices, Hauser suggests that communicators who attempt to avoid or control the discourse of their publics – he points to the Meese Commission in particular – ultimately fail,
while communicators who attempt to understand and interact with their publics – and here he emphasizes Franklin Delano Roosevelt – ultimately succeed. Instead of manufacturing cover-ups or placating irate publics, Hauser’s perspective encourages us to see public relations as truly relating, with successful relationships characterized by openness, attentiveness, and responsiveness.

5.1. Openness

Successful relationships require openness to conversation and challenge. Without openness, interaction of the type Hauser’s model suggests becomes impossible.

Hauser’s chapter on the Meese Commission’s report on pornography offers a telling example of the consequences of a lack of openness. In an effort to make its case on pornography, he argues, the Commission took a heavy-handed approach that labeled dissent as perversion and succeeded only in producing an “aura of intimidation” (p. 187). While the report succeeded in generating some grassroots protest in its favor, it failed to generate support for its political agenda. Hauser makes a compelling – and surprising – case that it was actually the Commission’s efforts to dominate and control the conversation of its publics that kept it from generating the political support it desired because its tactics stifled the broad-based conversation it needed to succeed.

Hauser suggests that leaders who desire “conversation” or “dialogue” need to understand that true conversation includes times where they may not be able to define the agenda or the outcome. It requires risk and trust, which are especially difficult to find in crisis situations, where the crisis is often humiliating, constituencies are angry, and legal advisors counsel restraint. In the clergy sex scandal, the problem was more complicated because the demands for “dialogue” and “openness” on the part of some critical publics often masked ideological agendas.

Though the bishops eventually opted for “transparency and openness” (USCCB, 2002, p. 9), a lack of openness was an unfortunate theme of their communication, epitomized by the Vatican press conference following the April 2002 meeting of the American cardinals with the pope. Of the twelve American cardinals, only two showed for the conference, which they all had previously agreed to attend. As television cameras showed the two remaining cardinals seated at a long table surrounded by empty chairs, the leadership said volumes about its willingness to interact and its opinion of the media.

The cardinals’ absence also deprived them of the opportunity to address the major news item of the day: their statement to the media, notable in its bureaucratic double-speak and its apparently facile distinction between the sexual abuse of children that was “notorious” and abuse that was “not notorious” (Vatican, 2002). The media, no doubt reflecting the confusion of many in the viewing audience, pounced on this apparent contradiction, but the cardinals were unable to mitigate the confusion because they were not there to explain themselves.

What is more, the cardinals were unable to clarify an unspoken issue of pivotal importance: That the papal “summit,” while not meaningless, simply could not have produced definitive norms on clergy sexual misconduct or change any of the church’s teachings on the priesthood or sexual ethics, as many in the media and the general public apparently expected (see Globe, 2002). The cardinals’ lack of openness – a deadly mix of anger, embarrassment, bureaucratic fastidiousness, and clerical arrogance – kept them from helping their publics have reasonable expectations in a critical moment. It not only sent the wrong message but also made communicating the right one impossible.
5.2. Attentiveness

Successful relationships with publics require attentiveness to their discourse and activities, their movements and complexity. Leaders must be as attentive to publics as publics are attentive to them.

“Attentiveness” seems a more accurate term for a Hauserian approach than “listening” because it embraces the breadth and complexity of vernacular discourses publics engage in, many of which cannot be “heard” in the traditional sense. True attentiveness to publics requires a thickness of description Hauser believes cannot be found in the opinion polls and other quantitative metrics that are often the stock and trade of traditional public relations.

Instead, Hauser sees public discourse as a social text and seeks to understand a public’s values, opinions, and movements through nontraditional questions. “Each manifestation of [public] sentiment may be read as a text,” he writes, including “consumer behavior of purchase and boycott, public letters, letters to public officials, speeches, symbolic acts, demonstrations, votes, strikes, essays, uses of public places, attendance at public meetings, graffiti, and an assortment of other forms of approval or disapproval” (p. 107). Because publics “speak” in unexpected ways, leaders must become literate in “the multiple vernacular and formal languages” they use (p. 153). Attentiveness owes more to ethnography and hermeneutics than statistical analysis. It makes public relations a human, as well as a social, science.

Attentiveness to publics in the sense Hauser’s model suggests requires an incredible amount of resources, critical expertise, and time. Communicators must choose wisely. For my office, for instance, monitoring letters, e-mails, and phone calls became a crucial part of our crisis communication strategy because our publics used those channels routinely. For us, listening to phone calls and responding to e-mails were important windows to observe and respond to our publics’ questions in a pivotal time.

5.3. Responsiveness

Successful interactions ultimately require responsiveness, though this responsiveness is different than what some may expect.

Habermas and his supporters tend to think of responsiveness in formal terms, as direct answers to the challenges that publics bring to institutions. Responsive discourse becomes, in Leon Mayhew’s (1997) terms, a process of challenging rhetorical “tokens” to ensure their validity (pp. 134–135). Without this direct confrontation, they cannot describe discourse as responsive.

Hauser’s critique of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s use of correspondence in his third presidential campaign, however, suggests a different sort of responsiveness. FDR was unusually accessible by mail, he says, and in attending to his correspondence, FDR found not only a sense of gratitude for the New Deal but also an emerging “narrative of opposition” among members of that key public against his conservative opponents – a narrative that he, in turn, used in his speeches (p. 256, emphasis his). More than simply parroting back what his publics said, Hauser believes, Roosevelt was attempting to address his publics as people, articulating their hopes and answering their questions in their own vernacular voices. By responding to his publics in this way, Roosevelt was participating in their discourse – and strengthening their support of his candidacy for an unprecedented third term.

Roosevelt’s responsiveness completes the process of openness and attentiveness to publics in a moment of ambiguity. FDR’s quest for re-election, Hauser observes, was fraught with questions, such as the unprecedented nature of a third term, the rising threat of war in Europe, and FDR’s own health. But by
being unusually open and attentive to his publics, FDR was able to respond to their questions in mutually positive ways.

In the same way, the church, like any institution in crisis, faced questions that went beyond the issues that were ostensibly up for public debate. Publics were asking difficult questions about the role of the priesthood, canonical processes, homosexuality, and myriad other concerns. Unfortunately, many of these questions involved dense theological issues that, given the structure of the church, could not be changed, regardless of how strenuously some quarters objected to them.

In some ways, it would have been easier to ignore these questions, since they distracted from the core messages the bishops wanted to deliver. But from Hauser’s perspective, silence on the questions asked in schools, church parking lots, and grocery stores would only promote speculation and frustration and would in fact deprive church leaders of a valuable opportunity to clarify where they stood. Like FDR, the bishops needed to find ways to peel away the layers of the media to interact with the people in the pew and respond to their concerns and questions, even if their concerns seemed a little further a field from the issues at hand. Though they could not change what had happened, and though they could not change the answers to the many of questions their publics posed, they could at least have made themselves understood.

6. Conclusions

Ultimately, in a crisis communication situation, the best thing, and often the only thing, an institution can do is to be sincere and clear about where it stands, and sometimes, the most optimistic communication objective is to be understood. Hauser’s work suggests ways that scholars and practitioners can understand the interactions between leaders and their publics to cultivate such understanding. In Hauser’s conception, publics naturally debate and develop shared understandings about issues that are important to them, and their leaders have an opportunity to shape those understandings by being open to their publics and attentive and responsive to the meanings their publics are developing. Hauser’s work suggests an interactional ideal that places leaders and publics on cooperative rather than on solely confrontational terms.

Instead of hiding in institutional doublespeak or in anger at publics who just do not seem to “get it,” Hauser’s work invites leaders to see publics as allies, not just threats. By being open, attentive, and responsive to such sources of power, leaders may be able to find understanding instead of just anger and frustration. Though no amount of public relations could have avoided or hidden the crisis the church faced, a better, more relational public relations could have helped it to negotiate the conflict and allowed it – and its publics – to weather the storm better.

References


