

Public relations and anti-racism digital advocacy: Moving beyond consensus-driven communication

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Abstract

Social media platforms are being used to shift the balance of power, functioning as tools of resistance for activist publics on social justice issues. This article uses a postmodern approach to public relations with the purpose of clarifying the role of dissensus in social media contexts, connecting it to the principles of the ethics of care that promote dialogue but not necessarily with the aim of achieving consensus. Scholars and practitioners can claim a broader role for public relations in society by considering and analyzing conflicting perspectives in digital communication as a way to engage with activist struggles in social justice and human rights causes.

By applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) to a case study that articulates the concepts of intentional positioning in public relations and corporate political advocacy, this research analyzes the first national weekly Portuguese newspaper *Expresso* support for the anti-racist cause through its promotion of a manifesto and a Facebook post against racist intimidation.

In a contemporary society characterized by fragmentation, taking a public stance on important social and political issues, as in the case analyzed, demands moving beyond consensus-driven communication. The data confirm that social media platforms are not necessarily dialogic spaces and that conflicting communicative perspectives may be a useful way to analyze social change in public relations theory and practice. By taking a public stand against racist intimidation, assuming the possible alienation of specific publics — and “Facebook bullying”— this private newspaper also cultivates an ethics of care.

Keywords: Public relations, communication, advocacy, digital, dissensus