

Public Interest Communication

PUBLIC INTEREST COMMUNICATION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

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We gratefully acknowledge the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which this project originated, this Country known as Australia, where Aboriginal people have lived and practiced their culture for many thousands of years.

We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.

Artwork acknowledgement: *A Guidance Through Time* by Quandamooka artist, Casey Coolwell and Kyra Mancktelow.



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Learn more about [The University of Queensland's Reconciliation Action Plan](#).

INTRODUCTION

There are not many concepts that are more embedded in the development of democratic thinking than ‘the public interest’. It is entrenched in public and political speech, in laws and policy documents, in how the media explain their business – in fact the phrase ‘the public interest’ has become so well used that there are sceptics who think it has lost its real meaning. Our aim in this book is to show that the public interest is not only a valuable concept in democratic governance, but that it provides a practical mechanism for working through problems, conundrums, and challenges in the complex modern world. It is the utility of the public interest that makes it so useful.

You may have heard of the public interest in the context of ‘public interest journalism’ or ‘public interest law’ or allied with another field of industry or practice. It is originally from the field of politics, with a long history of analysis by scholars from that field (such as Bozeman, 2007; Dewey, 1927; Flathman, 1966). It has also been ‘adopted’ by many other fields such as psychology, accounting, anthropology, to examine everything from public housing to public health. For the purposes of this book we go one step further than examining its nature and application – we are centrally interested in *how it is communicated*. Therefore, this book first explores the root concept of the public interest before moving onto to examining how it is circulated and enabled through communication and finally, to many contexts in which it can be seen in action.

The purpose of this book

Our book has two primary purposes: first to continue the work of scholars and practitioners who have called for and written about the connections between communication and public interest and, in so doing, continue developing *a theory of public interest communication* (e.g., Dutta 2018; Heath & Waymer, 2018; Johnston & Pieczka, 2018; Somerville & Davidson, 2018). The second is to explore public interest communication *in action* grounded in the theory building that comes before. This second part will go to different contexts in which public interest communication occurs all around us – in the work of advocacy, activism, capacity building, partnerships and alliances, and social enterprises, in dealing with so-called ‘wicked problems’ within civil society, government and business.

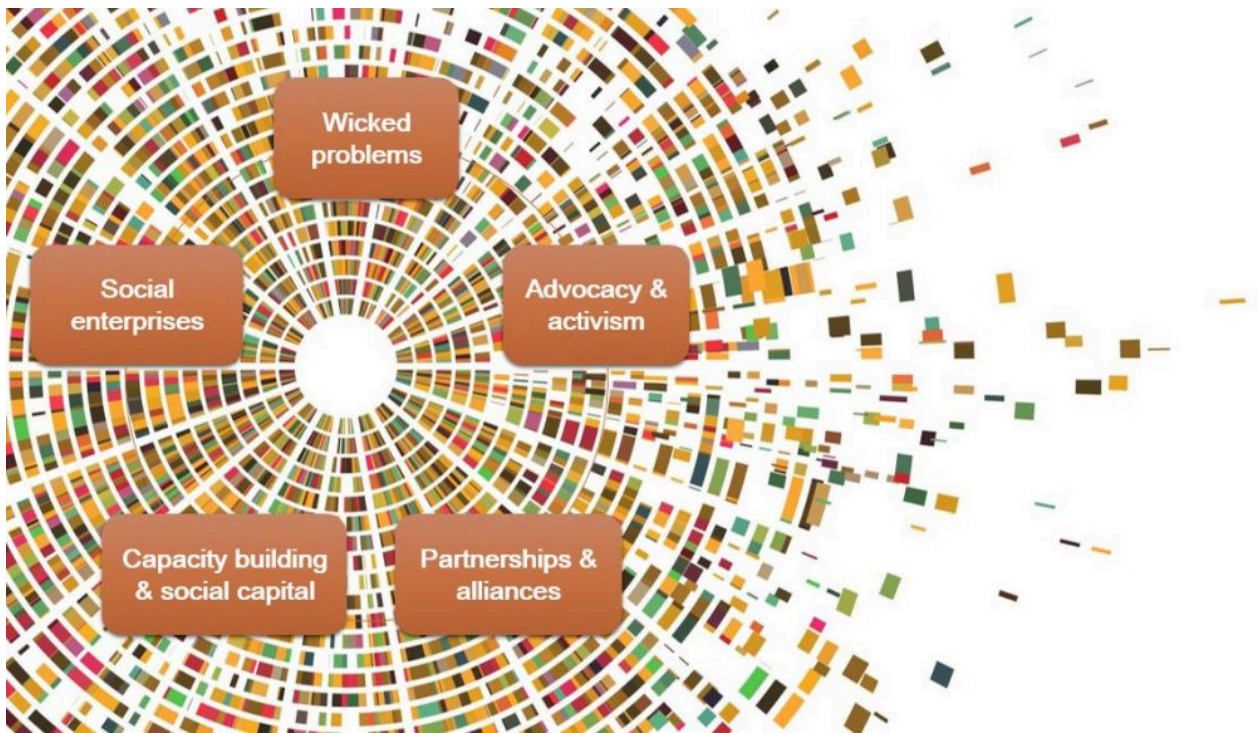


Figure 1: Concepts and practices covered in this course

The book will introduce you to some new concepts and revisit some concepts you may be familiar with from earlier study. For example, we will examine ‘wicked problems’ which are complex and difficult to resolve. We will consider how ‘public discourse arenas’ provide places for public interest communication to occur, and how ‘publics’ sit at the centre of public interest communication. We will investigate how public interest communication is essentially an ‘action-based’ concept that prioritises workable solutions. This book aims to take you on a journey: not a journey of developing public relations campaigns, or media strategies, or writing styles; instead to help you consider:

New and pragmatic ways of thinking about communication that are not discipline-specific

New perspectives of how communication can benefit people

New ways of understanding communication in democracies

Given that public interest communication is something we *do*, this book situates public interest communication theory in practical examples through a range of case studies, examples, applications and other links. That does not diminish the deep theoretical underpinnings of public interest communication we look at throughout the book. In the book, we take an international focus in considering the current issues and challenges facing public interest communication: from working within different democratic societies, seeking solutions to wicked problems, or developing new partnerships to build social capital and improve the lives of communities and environments. The ultimate purpose of this book is to demonstrate

the critical need for a deep understanding of public interest communication in working through complex issues and problems – both large and small.

The structure of this book

Part 1 of this book considers the theoretical basis of public interest communication. Each chapter covers a different theoretical aspect of public interest communication:

- Chapter 1: What is the public interest?
- Chapter 2: Communicating public interest
- Chapter 3: Publics
- Chapter 4: Discourse arenas
- Chapter 5: Ethics

Part 2 situates this theory in five different contexts for public interest communication in action.

- Chapter 6: Wicked problems
- Chapter 7: Advocacy and activism
- Chapter 8: Partnerships and alliances
- Chapter 9: Capital and capacity building
- Chapter 10: Social enterprises
- Conclusion

In each chapter we include a selection of tasks, resources, case studies and reflections to demonstrate how public interest communication challenges apply to our daily lives plus workplace challenges of the communication professional. Further readings and activities can be accessed via the drop down menus at the end of the some chapters. Through this material we seek to demonstrate different communication approaches and contexts that have a public interest focus.

Our first learning activity goes to a topic most readers will use and take for granted in everyday life: social media. The ‘conundrum’ provides an example of thought provoking material used throughout this book, raising questions for group discussion.

Conundrum: Social media – force for good or weapon for conflict?

The [following video](#) by the [International Crisis Group](#) demonstrates the complexity and challenges of modern public interest communication around the globe. The short video

considers how social media can both enable free speech, but also shape and drive social conflict that can lead to devastating consequences. Social media has been very important for supporting access to public communication and providing arenas of debate to greater numbers of people, but as this video shows, it brings new challenges. What do you think? Does social media foster positive public interest communication?



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=94#oembed-1>

Video 1: How Social Media Shapes Conflict, by the International Crisis Centre. Licence: [Creative Commons Attribution licence \(reuse allowed\)](#)

We invite you to engage and reflect on how communication practices can seek to resolve problems as you read through this book. Only by acknowledging, understanding and considering the many different interests and approaches which make up our vibrant public sphere can we seek to ‘do well by doing good’ (this popular quote is usually attributed to US statesman and philosopher Benjamin Franklin and is further explored in chapter 10).



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=94#h5p-9>

PART I

BUILDING PUBLIC INTEREST COMMUNICATION THEORY

1.

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC INTEREST?

Public interest communication: the foundations

Public Interest Communication is a developing field which is gaining traction with all sorts of communication disciplines – public relations (PR), political communication, advocacy and activism, to name a few. It is fundamentally about finding ways to work through issues of social justice, manage public problems, and enable public debate, through inquiry and discovery. It calls on the communication industries to take charge of their own futures and choose ethical pathways with clear lines of governance and accountability. Recently, the World Public Relations Forum Global Alliance chose the theme [‘connecting with courage’](#) to describe how the profession might move into the future. Embedded in this was the importance of the public interest for PR and communication. It said:

- It takes courage to represent public interest, steer ethically and be conscientious.
- The courage to adapt, have an understanding of, and communicate across cultures.
- 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.

We think the theme of ‘courage’ is a good fit, because sometimes communication in the public interest requires difficult choices. The Global Alliance is in good company in including the public interest in its call to action. Leading public relations figure [Harold Burson \(2012\)](#) argued that “we who choose careers in public relations also have an implied obligation to what we call the public interest”. He said it was incumbent on the role of PR to reconcile employer goals with the public interest. “Yes, communications and establishing relationships are part of the mix, but the process must start with appropriate behaviour that serves the public interest.” Many others have also added their voice to this argument and throughout this book we will include their approaches. Reflecting this, in this book we draw ideas and concepts from a range of theoretical and practical fields – from public relations and communication, to sociology and political science.

US scholar Jasper Fessmann has examined the field of public interest communication, connecting it to strategic communication, PR, nonprofit communication and philanthropic communication. He defines the field as: “the development and implementation of science based, planned strategic communication campaigns with the main goal of achieving significant and sustained positive behavioural change on a public interest issue that transcends the particular interests of any single organisation” (2016, p. 16).

While we share some common ideas with Fessmann’s approach to public interest communication, particularly in its capacity to broaden the scope of public communication, we diverge from it in a number

of ways. Rather than connecting or aligning *public interest communication* to any one field, discipline or even sector (such as nonprofit communication or PR) we view its application more broadly “as a way of thinking and doing” communication (Johnston, 2016, p. 203). We position stakeholders as the central focus of this theory and, in so doing, see it less associated with strategic communication which is often connected with organisational output-focussed goals.

Perhaps most significantly we depart from Fessmann’s approach by positioning public interest communication as rooted in *public interest theory* itself, complete with the tensions and messy realities that exist within modern political and social systems. This comes with the need for dialogue, debate and, sometimes, argument to make sure competing, diverse and minority interests are heard. Our application thus proposes that reflexivity, participation, inquiry and debate are needed to sort through and engage with the myriad of interests people hold and the complicated contexts in which these may converge or diverge.

As we introduce in the next chapter, public interest *communication* thus exists as part of a ‘**dialectic**’ where it is as much about *the process* of debating and discussing interests and issues as it is about finding the best *solution or outcome*. We follow others, as noted later in this chapter, in choosing *not to define* public interest but rather to explore its various applications and manifestations in our social world. That said, perhaps after reading this book, you might like to workshop your own definition of public interest with your class? Early public interest scholar Frank Sorauf called it “the X factor, the imponderable and the unknown, in the political equation” (1957, p. 617). It is also described as a “useful”, “deserving”, “convenient”, “vital” and “deserving” in determining society’s welfare (see Johnston, 2016, pp: 3-4).

So what is ‘the public interest’ anyway?

First, let’s deal with the idea of a single public interest as understood by the term ‘**the** public interest’.

Myth: there is no single public interest, so the idea of *the* public interest is really a nonsense. Rather, there are many *public interests*, just as there are *many publics*. Prominent public interest scholar Richard Flathman pointed out that “when combined with an insistence upon the universality of government action and with social and political conflict, this summation was not merely difficult but ... logically impossible” (1966, p. 21).

What’s more, the public interest is purposefully *not defined* so that it can be considered within different contexts and circumstances (Bozeman, 2007; Carter and Bouris, 2006, Wheeler, 2018). Its almost total lack of definition or operational meaning has remained a curiosity to scholars, in part due to the paradox this presents when considered alongside its pervasiveness and ubiquity within deliberative democracies, civil society, and as part of political discourse. Public policy scholar Barry Bozeman (2007) calls it a conundrum: “nearly everyone is convinced that the public interest is vital in public policy and governance, but there is little agreement as to exactly what it is” (p. 84).

This lack of definition therefore allows flexibility. So, for example, if you were arguing for public interest

in reducing homelessness; or in banning horse racing; or in the competing public interests of private versus public schools, each of these would be considered specifically in the context in which you were arguing it. These same issues would likely look different across different cultures because public expectations will vary – and public interests need to be considered within the context of the value system held by the society in which they are based.



Whose interests?
Why defining the
'public interest' is
such a challenge.

Read Johnston's article in
The Conversation, 2019

Figure 1: Jane writes about the challenge of [defining the 'public interest' in *The Conversation*](#)

Likewise, public interests are understood to move and shift with changing social mores, as the following statement sums up:

'...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](#)).

Flathman (1966) argued that the lack of definition of the public interest was irrelevant to its function: that it is simply part of political discourse. As such, it centres on public discussion about what matters and why. In law, it is formally set out. Indeed, the legal system is awash with references to the public interest. Wheeler (2018) cites mention of the 'public interest' in more than 250 separate pieces of legislation and over 50 regulations in Australia's most populous state (New South Wales). Nevertheless, the Australian Law Reform Commission suggests how it is interpreted should be "broad and flexible", further stating that "including a non-exhaustive list of public interest matters seems more helpful than a definition," (ALRC, 2014).

Thus, while public interest has no conclusive meaning, "its descriptive meaning is found through reasoned discourse that attempts to relate to changeable community values and is open to listening to a range of community perspectives" (Johnston 2023). This in turn "performs a logic" (Flathman, 1966, p. 40) within the policy and legislative environments in which we live.

Despite its lack of definition, Wheeler (2018) suggests the following list can provide guidance for finding the public interest in any given situation:

- complying with applicable law;
- carrying out functions fairly and impartially;
- complying with the principles of procedural fairness/natural justice;
- acting reasonably;
- ensuring accountability and transparency;
- exposing corrupt conduct or serious maladministration;
- avoiding or properly managing private interests conflicting with official duties; and
- acting apolitically in the performance of official functions.

There are other ideas which can help our understanding of the public interest. Over many decades the concept has not only been used in public discourse, it has also been theorised on a global scale by scholars from diverse disciplines and fields of thought. Some see it for its communitarian potentials (i.e. in bringing people together); others for recognising pluralism and diversity (i.e. in acknowledging difference); yet others for its normative value (i.e. as in a common good); and still others as a pragmatic concept (i.e. in applying action to problems). During the lock-down periods during the Covid-19 pandemic there was evidence of different countries (and regions) displaying different public interest approaches — for example, some communities displayed more community values, while others were more individualised in their responses, with reactions varying to government directives, either more accepting or pushing back. No doubt each thought their response had public interest merit.

Finally, we can see different ‘takes’ on public interest when we consider different professional fields that incorporate ‘public interest’ into their work: for example, *public interest journalism* focuses on investigative journalism which seeks to expose wrong-doing, as described [here in *The Conversation*](#), while *public interest law* is often used synonymously with ‘pro bono’ law, about making the legal services available to those with limited resources. Different professions have embraced the idea of public interest and applied it to their field, for example, there is some practice or scholarship in public policy and politics, law, media, accounting, anthropology, planning, and psychology (Johnston, 2017). Now, of course, we add communication and public relations to that list.

Public and private interests

Public and private interests

What sort of discussions are we having when we talk about the ‘public interest’ and how might

these differ from ‘private interests’? While the public interest is intrinsically connected to both public and private matters, discourse on the public interest links back to those community, legislative and policy environments Flathman (1966) describes above. So, while many interests are part of *both* our private and public spheres — such as working to manage the climate emergency, looking after the disadvantaged and the elderly, and even much of our media activity — some things are much more private. Let’s consider this in the following activity: select whether each of the following conversation topics refers *more* to public or private interests.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=749#h5p-38>

In further thinking about this, we could develop a public-private continuum using examples and concepts from the book. See, for example, how ‘enlightened self interest’, ‘the social contract’ and social enterprises incorporate aspects of public and private, community and individualism (covered in chapter 9). What these theories show us is that private interests can and do often overlap with public interests.

Public interest & fostering dialogue

Social and political problems are not easily or simply resolved. Leading theorist in this field, John Dewey, wrote: “Of course, there *are* conflicting interests; otherwise there would be no social problems” (1991, p. 81). Dewey’s comment flags the complexity of society which is made up of many interests, many publics, many problems and many conflicts.

Communication can play a major role in working through these complicated issues and scenarios. Somerville and Davidson (2018) illustrate this in their analysis of communication within “deeply divided societies”, such as Northern Ireland, finding one solution in the so-called ‘Partners and Communities Together’ (PACT) which brought together neighbourhood policing teams and local communities in a kind of “communicative ritual” (2018, p. 182). To work, such a ritual cannot be generated by authorities — it must have buy-in from all participants. In addition, there needs to be a willingness “to cede control of the dialogue and not fear the enactment of passionate disagreement” (Somerville and Davison, 2018, p. 187).

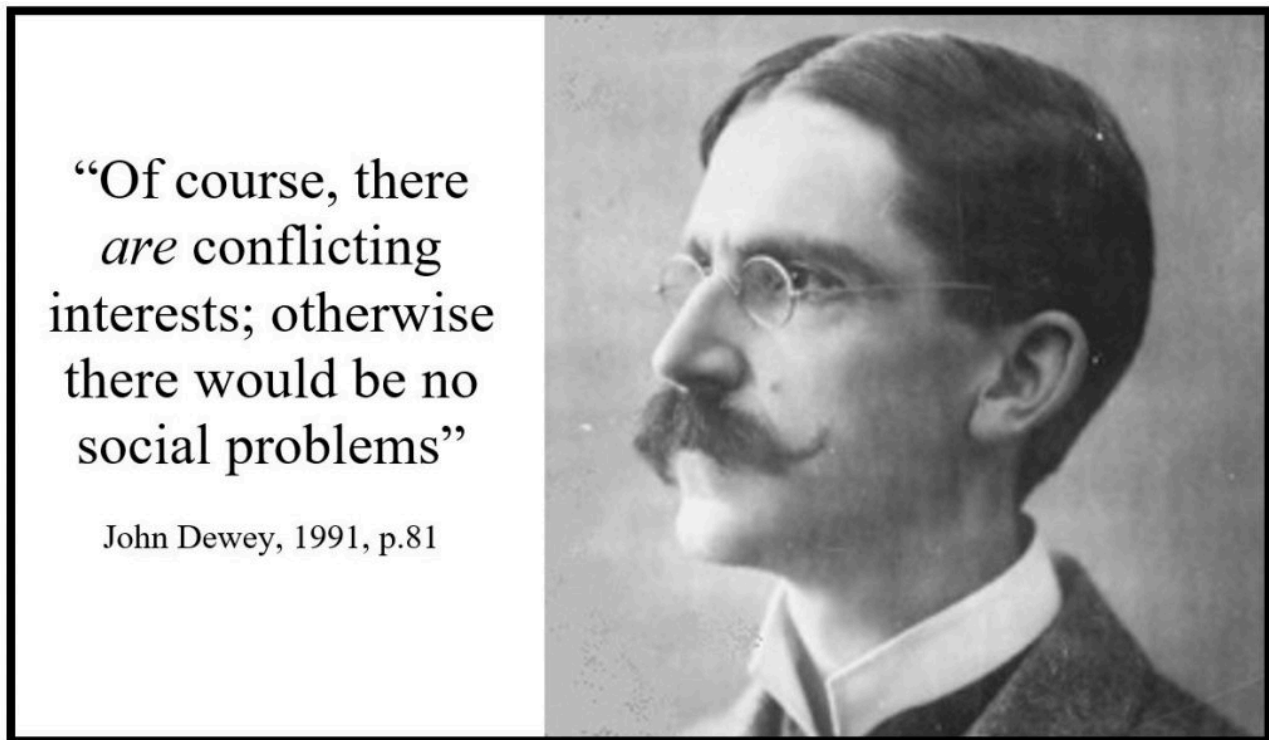


Figure 2: John Dewey

As communication scholar John Durham Peters (1999) says, communication is fundamentally political and ethical rather than simply semantic (meaning only about language). Questions must be asked: what were the social, historical, cultural and political contexts of the communication? And, how were public interests represented in them?

Conclusion

Just as public problems cannot be easily solved, public interest communication is not a ‘quick fix’. We see this regularly throughout this book, especially when we tackle complex or ‘wicked’ problems. Communication acts can help (re)solve problems, but they can also fail. While not a simple answer, public interest communication can provide a toolkit to help find and navigate strategies to work through difference, open communication channels and, hopefully, move society forward. In the following chapters we explore these themes in more detail.



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=749#h5p-37>

2.

COMMUNICATING PUBLIC INTEREST

Public interest communication brings together two powerful elements—public interest and communication—which when combined, provide a potent tool for addressing social problems. While the concept of the public interest comes from a long-established political theory and a concept that is embedded in laws, policy and public discourse at a global level, *public interest communication* has emerged more recently as a theoretical field and practical approach to problem solving. Here the focus is on communication. In the book [Public Interest Communication](#) Johnston and Pieczka (2018) say communicating about public interests demands ideas be allowed to circulate and debated in the process of seeking solutions to public problems or contested situations. While we know not all interest conflicts can or will be resolved, *communication* about different interests, representing different publics, in open discourse, is vital within democratically run systems of government.

Communication in the public interest is therefore premised on the idea of open dialogue, active listening and public argument. It can take a persuasive form, but more importantly it draws on **deliberative reasoning**. It is about opening up mechanisms for public debate which take place in public, usually in so-called ‘**public arenas**’ or ‘**discourse arenas**’ which unfold around problematic or contested situations. These arenas take many forms — they include physical public sites such as streets or parks; community and meeting halls; and parliamentary chambers and courtrooms. They also include media channels in many forms (print, broadcast, online, social, news, ambient) plus other forms of **deliberative action** such as citizen councils, juries and associations that may be held in various locations. Though we look at public-discourse arenas more closely in [chapter 4](#), it’s important to understand where they fit in during the early theory-building part of the book, as they are the places – both physical and mediated – where public interest communication usually takes place.

Public interest communication can be used to represent global issues and interests, such as the 2019 [Global Climate Strikes](#) which saw millions of people from hundreds of countries protest and [tell their stories](#) to fight the climate crisis. Importantly, it is about representing minority voices, or the stories of those working on local causes, alleviating regional problems such as illustrated in the following podcast.

Podcast: Gracie Mackie investigates the wicked problem of homelessness



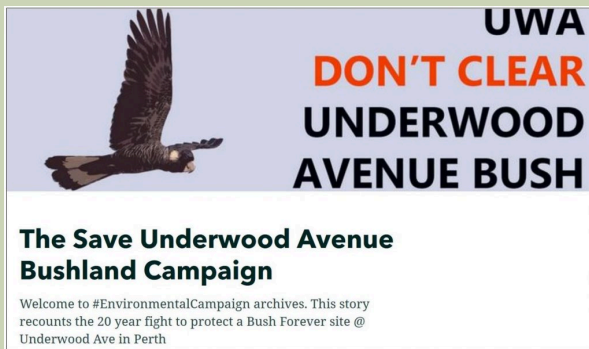
One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=35#audio-35-1>

In this podcast Gracie delves into the wicked problem of homelessness. Beginning with a personal experience meeting a person experiencing homelessness, she began a journey investigating the problem in Australia. With over 116,000 people homeless in Australia in 2016, Gracie spoke to a senior advisor and intervention work support worker to find out how they balance competing interests and demands in their work. For more information about homelessness and efforts being taken to prevent it visit www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au.

As we heard in the podcast, public interest communication can be used to represent the voices of marginalised or minority interests; voices of those who would otherwise be lost in the chaos and clatter of modern society. Public interest communication therefore has an ethical obligation to go beyond organisational or dominant interests and, at the very least, provide oxygen for other interests to be heard (Johnston, 2022, in press). Because not all individuals or publics have access to public debate, it can be enabled when small groups or even individual voices combine forces, making strategic alliances, or [partnering](#) with those who have a like-minded cause and value system. These then form **public interest groups** or public-private partnering, which connect [social and human capital](#), and bring the power of **civil society** alive. Non-government organisations (NGOs) are also examples of groups which form to promote a particular interest within society.

The following case study demonstrates how different groups and voices engage to debate issues in the public arena. This example began after community members sought to protect urban bushland in Perth from a proposed housing development by the University of Western Australia (UWA). Click on the image to explore the case study and reflect on questions underneath.

Case study: The Save Underwood Avenue Bushland Campaign



Explore Case Study 1: [The Save Underwood Avenue Bushland campaign](https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/6f576065fa0e4be7af483d83b48e81d7) (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/6f576065fa0e4be7af483d83b48e81d7>)

- What are the 'public interests' in this case study?
- Where do environmental needs fit in?
- How could the university, conservation groups and local council act in the best public interest to meet as many stakeholder interests as possible?
- What would you do if you worked for the university? Or if you were part of the group seeking to stop development on the bushland?

Open dialogue, active listening and dialectics

Let's pause for a minute and go back to basics – to some of the taken for granted ideas of communication. A central component is talking. Talking is about conversations and conversations are about dialogue, right? Dialogue is a communication tool that enables us to express our views but it is also about listening to and (trying to) understand the viewpoints of others. Dialogue is described as a [basic process for building common understanding](#). Accepting this, it makes sense to add into the dialogue mix the need to *really* listen to others when we take part in dialogue. Because dialogue promotes better understanding and cooperation between people it's a central part of public interest communication – allowing and enabling two or more points of view to be aired. Dialogue occurs at high levels – between countries, for example, in seeking to find common ground, understanding and peace. For example, The International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding is a global forum which was specifically set up to facilitate [political dialogue to bring together countries affected by conflict and fragility, development partners, and civil society](#). Dialogue also occurs at a personal level, as well as between and within different all types of organisations, from progress associations to corporates.

Dialogue has been adopted in PR as a dedicated theory, so-called 'dialogic public relations theory' (Kent and Tayler, 2002). This means using principles of dialogue to engage with publics openly and ethically to create effective communication. Central to this is the idea of actively listening to the other speakers or publics. Not surprisingly, PR has figured out that listening has been under-valued in our learning, teaching and practice with too great a focus on speaking. Professor Jim Macnamara from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) has developed what he calls an [Architecture of listening](#). Macnamara suggests that to engage with publics we need the following:

- A culture of listening,
- Policies, structures and processes for listening,
- Technologies for listening,

- Resources for listening, and
- Skills for listening.

To this we would add having *time for listening*, because effective listening should not be rushed. The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) in the United Kingdom conducted [a study into organisational listening](#) and found, not surprisingly, that nearly everyone thinks listening to stakeholders is important. The IABC surveyed some 140 organisations and found that these organisations overwhelmingly incorporated what they learned from listening into their strategic thinking.

Because in the real world not all dialogue is simple and smooth, and sometimes involves argumentation, we introduce you to the term ‘dialectic’: a somewhat complex concept which is essentially about one idea or thesis being considered against an opposing idea or anti-thesis, ideally to reach a synthesis. Put another way, it’s about dialogue between two or more parties who hold different points of view, with the intent to learn from each other to get closer to agreement: in essence, a problem, a reaction and attempting to find a solution. Johnston and Pieczka (2018) say that public interest communication should be treated as a dialectic, as inquiry driven, with its primary orientation to ask questions, to reflect and respond. This is the ‘tug-of-war’ we occasionally refer to in this book.

Public Interest Communication in the Spotlight: The Sydney Alliance

Read the story of [The Sydney Alliance by Amanda Tattersal in The Conversation](#). [The Sydney Alliance](#) is an NGO which seeks to increase the power of small groups and individuals by building cross-sector networks and training a new generation of leaders reinvigorating Australia’s civil society.

Acting out public interest communication

There are many ways that public interest communication can be connected to action, as the second part of the book illustrates. In putting these into a theoretical perspective, we draw on the work of US PR scholar Thomas Bivins (1993) who proposed four paradigms of public interest for the field of public relations, each positioning public interest quite differently in how it is acted out in society. These are:

1. Paradigm I: If every public relations practitioner acts in the best interest of his or her client, then the public interest will be automatically served.
2. Paradigm II: If a public relations practitioner serves public interest causes while serving individual interests, the public interest will be served.
3. Paradigm III: If public relations as a profession guarantees that every individual receives services they need or want, then the public interest will be served.

4. Paradigm IV: If public relations as a profession enhances the quality of debate over issues important to the public, the public interest will be also served.

These paradigms each provide discussion points for students to consider how public interest may be applied as public interest communication.

Let's jump straight to paradigm 4 which we think rises to the top because of the central need for public interest communication to act out and debate issues and problems in public spaces. What do we mean by 'the quality of debate'? Well, this calls for *real* discussion, with *real* access by relevant publics, and not just a box ticking exercise. Many such examples are highlighted throughout the book in podcasts and case studies, or through examples such as the referendum for marriage equality in Ireland or the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras (later in the book).

What these paradigms and examples demonstrate is the difficulty in first establishing public interest and, second, ensuring that public interest communication enables fair, ethical, and equitable access to public arenas for all. Clearly, this a challenging task. So, maybe we need a check list for ensuring public interest communication can take place?

What are the dimensions of public interest communication?

Public interest communication may be understood as "the interplay between communication and other public-interest practices, such as regulation, decision making, circulation of knowledge, formation of opinions, attitudes and routines/scripts for performing the public interest in public" (Johnston & Pieczka, 2018, p. 23). With these many elements in mind, Johnston & Pieczka (2018) list six dimensions through which public interest communication can occur. These are:

1. Publicness – ensuring debate is held in public spaces.
2. Accessibility – making communication available to individuals to participate both in physical spaces and through shared cultural understanding.
3. Substantive anchoring – using a language that is known and understood by those who want to take part (aka a 'discourse environment').
4. Rationality – ensuring communication encompasses reason giving or explanations for decisions-made.
5. Inter-subjectivity – having shared interests and understandings with others.
6. Connectedness – taking shared interests and connecting them to action.

This final idea of 'action' brings us to how public interest communication may be understood as a form of *pragmatic communication*, which is also about managing public problems and seeking solutions through communication. Pragmatism sees a problem and seeks to find a solution through inquiry and action. Public interest communication brings to this the crucial role of publics, as we explore in more detail in the next chapter. In considering pragmatism we can return to the wisdom of John Dewey from the previous chapter who was known to be a pragmatic thinker. He proposed that in the absence of finding "absolute truth, a dialogically tested and gauged kind of knowledge is the best we can get" (Bieger, 2020, p. 3). A keen

follower of Dewey, US policy scholar Barry Bozeman calls this thinking “pragmatic idealism”, which he describes 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, p. 13).

This reminds us that public interest communication is aspirational because there are limitations in any society. The reality is that not all individuals or publics have access to public debate and sometimes it will be shut down or may represent real risk for those associated with speaking out, as we consider in [Chapter 7 on Advocacy and Activism](#). In such environments public interest communication cannot thrive or may not even exist. Where propaganda, fake news and even one-sided communication repress alternative views, we see an environment at the opposite end of the communication spectrum to public interest communication. In moving toward that ideal, however, as the next chapter explores, counter-publics and counter-narratives can sometimes rise up.

Review Questions

Reflect on the following questions:

- Why is public interest communication vital for democratic societies?
- What are some of the ‘public arenas’ or ‘discourse arenas’ that you have taken part in?
- What are some of the groups that you have heard of engaging in public interest communication?
- What are some of the ethical obligations of practitioners engaged in public interest communication?



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=35#h5p-8>

3.

PUBLICS

Just as the idea of a single public interest has been debunked by political philosophers, so too have scholars in fields such as public relations rejected the notion that society is made up of any single public. Rather, we live in societies made up of many publics. An early way of explaining this was John Dewey's description in his book *The Public and its Problems*, in which he said "In no two ages or places is there the same public. Conditions make the consequences of associated action and the knowledge of them different" (Dewey, 1927, p. 33).

This early thinking about publics has been developed to provide many insights into how we can better understand publics as complex and dynamic parts of society.

In **pluralist societies** which consist of many and varied publics, it stands to reason that as many values and interests will be represented. Many publics – as with interests – will often be in conflict or compete with each other, existing in fragmented, **heterogeneous** forms because that is the nature of complex, contemporary societies where clear distinctions and divisions are unrealistic. Even *within* identifiable publics there may be *many* opinions and, potentially, conflicting interests. In this regard publics mirror the inter-group dynamics experienced by different individuals. Take for example the so-called 'anti-vaxxer' movement that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. In their study of this fragmented public, public relations scholars Katharina Wolf and Petra Theunissen (2021) identified what they called an "eclectic collective of individuals" in this movement.

Colloquially referred to as 'anti-vaxxers', the anti-COVID-19 measures movement consists of conspiracy theorists, the far right, religious groups, individuals traditionally opposed to vaccinations, those challenging the legitimacy of mandates and others who have become caught up in the increasingly diverse opposition movement due to increasing mistrust in their respective governments. (Wolf & Theunissen, 2021).

This illustrates that publics don't always come together in unison — far from it. Individuals and separate groups within an identifiable public may come together for a range of reasons: for mutual benefit of members, idea exchange, alliances, advocacy, peer support, to enhance a sense of belonging or simply to amplify their voice. Some of these differences are further examined in the later chapter on social capital.

At the same time, many publics do come together with a strong degree of uniformity to form coherent groups. Often, an overarching interest will bind people together and see past their differences.

Such was the case with the freeing of controversial Australian journalist Julian Assange in 2024. Assange had been in asylum then prison since 2010 for publishing classified US military documents on the Afghan and Iraq wars on his Wikileaks site. Over time, a disparate array of publics got behind Assange to seek his release. This included groups who picketed his UK court appearances, members of international media, human rights supporters, and politicians of all political persuasions from around the world. They were

reported as “countless figures of global power and influence, including former leader of the UK Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn, linguist Noam Chomsky, Baywatch star Pamela Anderson, and the late fashion icon Dame Vivienne Westwood” (BBC, 2024).

Julian Assange: What his freedom means for the rest of us



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=37#oembed-1>

Watch this panel discussion by DiEM25 which considers the implications of Julian Assange's release not only for press freedom, but also for democracy and political transparency more broadly.

In Australia, his supporters came from all sides of politics: one study found 60% of Labor voters agreed that the US Biden Administration should drop the charges and allow Assange to return to Australia, as did 63% of Greens voters, 58% of One Nation voters, 54% of Coalition voters and 48% of Independent/Other voters (The Australia Institute, 2024). Likewise, while the Labor government was said to have spearheaded actions to secure his release, the leader of the Opposition, as well as many Independent politicians also supported it.

In big cases such as this, as well as in scholarly research, we see publics become linked to social or political problems or issues. This *Situational Theory of Publics* proposed by US PR scholar James Grunig (1997) suggests that publics exist depending on whether they are *aware* of a problem, in addition to their *level of response* to it. In this theory, there are three variables that will influence a public's level of activity:

1. Problem recognition—do I see a problem that needs to be fixed?
2. Level of involvement—am I affected by it?
3. Constraint recognition—can I do anything about it?

If members of a particular public answer yes to all three variables, they are considered an **active public**, or possibly an **activist public**. If they answer yes to one or two of the variables, then they may be located along a scale of **aware, latent, or apathetic publics**, with the potential to become active.

Based on this, a more recent definition says publics are “A group of people linked through a shared interest in an issue, whose motivation to act varies depending on their awareness of the issue, the level of concern held and the constraints that limit action” (Johnston & Glenny, 2021, p. 6).

We can therefore apply this thinking to publics that are obviously involved in or at the centre of an issue: students at a university who have problems with parking or public transport; a community affected by water contamination; a village dealing with years of drought; a religious group which is victimised due to its faith; parents who have poor facilities for their disabled children; or, in the case of Julian Assange, a disparate series of global publics with a common cause. In all these cases, and many more you may come up with, you can work through the three variables.

Nevertheless, even when individuals may recognise a problem, and feel affected by it, there is a high likelihood that individuals will feel disempowered at number 3. They may feel that they are not able to do much about the problem. Sometimes publics will respond to this by joining forces in an alliance (aka creating a public interest action group), lobbying a member of parliament, or protesting online or in the street. Johnston calls this acting as “the squeaky wheel” to government, law and policy makers in bringing the issue or problem to their attention (2016, p. 154). In the Assange case, the squeaky wheel got louder and louder over time as pressure grew from publics and sectors globally. Drawing from key themes in other chapters this saw the development of discourse arenas, in which arguments were vocalised; capacity building, in which people came together; and partnerships in which publics aligned. That is not to say everyone agreed with the outcome — the point is that, over time, this case study showed public interest communication in action.

The #MeToo movement

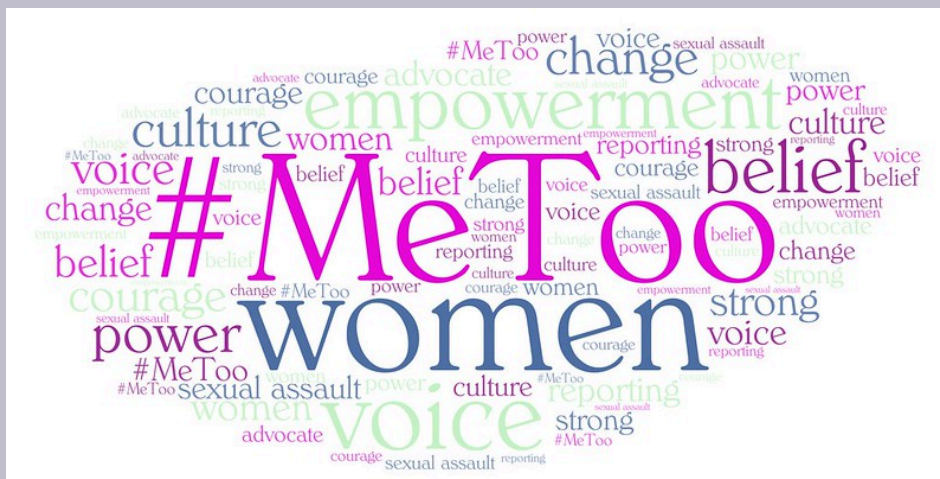


Figure 1: Word cloud of words associated with the #MeToo movement

Social media is becoming an increasingly powerful arena for many publics to raise awareness and drive change. The #MeToo Twitter hashtag demonstrates how a purely online phenomena – coined in 2006 by Tarana Burke – changed what began as a grassroots campaign to help underprivileged girls deal with sexual assault into a global movement. Its peak moment was ostensibly when *Time* magazine named #MeToo as their ‘Person of the Year’ in 2017.

The movement has changed debate around sexual harassment around the globe and raised women's voices to empower them to speak out. But others question: has it gone too far? Watch the video by [Jubilee – 'Has The #MeTooMovement Gone Too Far?'](#). What do you think?

Here, we can identify an allied field to public interest — **the public sphere** — which political philosopher Jürgen Habermas talks of as a place in which “society engaged in critical public debate” (1989, p. 52). This work has been particularly important for understanding the role of publics in influencing political debate and government decision-making through mobilising public opinion. Later work on the the public sphere considered how ‘counter-publics’ command inclusivity, participation and access for less powerful and marginalised people, as discussed below.

In the following sections we consider some distinctions and differences for different types of publics or allied concepts.

Types of publics

Organisational publics

Organisational communication has traditionally considered publics in relation to the practice and activity of an organisation or institution. In contrast, public interest communication follows the school of thought that publics exist independently; that is, they are issue or problem focussed. Nevertheless, organisations and institutions do take advantage of knowledge about publics in how they engage with and target them. This type of information draws on factors such as demographics, geographics, psychographics, and the level of influence within communities. This can be very useful for organisations or institutions when needing to communicate with certain publics on specific issues, such as when communicating around a health campaign. During COVID-19, health organisations and institutions played a critical role in engaging publics and targeting them with health-specific messaging. During this time, the diversity of publics raised a myriad of challenges — e.g. how to communicate effectively with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, how to present clear messaging about vaccinations, and, how to target people who distrust mainstream spokespeople and channels of communication.

Counter-publics

Another way of thinking about publics is to consider how some exist in opposition to the status quo or the official position on an issue, sometimes called ‘counter-publics’. These publics are considered equivalent to an oppositional movement. Daniel Cefaï describes [counter-publics](#) as those which use a range of protest actions, openly confronting their adversaries in public debates while dealing with threats, censorship, disqualification, paternalism or being hijacked for other purposes (e.g. the 1960s civil rights movement or the ongoing gay rights movement). Critical theorist Nancy Fraser (1993) talks about members of ‘subordinated social groups’ which create alternative or counter-narratives in opposition to the dominant

view. For example the ‘counter narrative’ to the Australian Government’s 2013 *Operation Sovereign Borders* policy on asylum seekers were stories about the people seeking refugee status and the conditions in which they were being detained (Johnston, 2015).

Hashtag publics

In recent years, the idea that publics coalesce around specific issues or problems has seen the emergence of a new type of public – so-called ‘hashtag publics’ (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). These publics are known to self-organise or exist within constructed digital publics, providing the opportunity for organisers of causes or events to engage and rally support. Criticisms of the ‘hashtag public’ say it has evolved into the so-called ‘**post-truth**’ world of communication in which publics exist increasingly within echo-chambers where decision-making is not always evidence based or rational. Nevertheless, this form of communication has given voice to those who might not otherwise have had a say and brought people together who share a common social complaint – such as #metoo and #freeassange. It has raised awareness about fundraising for causes – such as #icebucketchallenge, and rallied people to vote for a social change – such as #hometovote. Each of these hashtag examples are briefly explained in the quiz below. Can you guess who the key publics are for each?



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=37#h5p-20>

Stakeholders

We sometimes use the terms publics and stakeholders interchangeably. Not everyone agrees with this merging of terms, but you will find both used in business, government, not for profits and activist communication. The term stakeholder is said to derive from an internal memorandum at the Stanford Research Institute in the 1960s, later popularized by business theorist Edward Freeman in the 1980s. Traditionally, the concept focused around the groups (or individuals) who can affect or be affected by an organisation’s objectives, predominantly business shareholders who have an economic stake in an organisation. Over time, it broadened to include the environment and other non-human stakeholders (and not just people).

Public power

The evolved theory of publics now considers publics in their own right instead of simply how they might affect an organisation (for better or worse). Professional fields of communication have become increasingly aware of the need to work *with* publics, rather than targeting their campaigns simply *at* publics. The ‘power of the public’ is illustrated in how PR giant Hill + Knowlton describe [a key strategy](#) in the following way:

‘We believe that every corporate, every brand, every client has a public and today’s public is more powerful than ever before. They have the power to topple CEOs, reshape corporate and brand strategy, influence government policy, kill products and create unicorns. Today’s public demands truth, transparency and the highest behavioral standards’. (Hill + Knowlton, 2021).

Hill + Knowlton’s strategy also highlights how publics should be given **agency**. By this we mean publics – and the individuals who make them up – should be respected for their opinions, be able to effectively engage with the structures around them, and to be agents over their own life and future. This idea reinforces how agency is integrally linked to communication within social, political and cultural structures which in turn can empower or disempower individuals and publics.

Food Relief and Second Bite: A podcast exploring trust building, emergency food relief and social capital creation.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=37#audio-37-1>

Aiden Taylor’s podcast explores how an emergency food relief program in Brisbane is helping people gain confidence, improve health outcomes and create stronger community ties. Through this program, Aiden argues, people who have experienced discrimination and hardship are building their sense of agency. This is a powerful example of how public interest communication in practice can help empower publics. Listen to Aiden’s podcast [here](#).

Likewise public interest communication pivots on individuals having agency over the communication about the issues and interests that affect them. Professional communication practice can assist with providing this agency, through acting as agents themselves, but this does not dilute the need for individuals and publics, whether small or large, digital or face to face, local or global, to be able to exercise their own agency. At the same time, we know that not all individuals, publics or even public alliances have access to public debate and the decision-making process. And we are reminded that public interest communication does not guarantee access and agency, despite its best aims. These ideas are developed as we explore the final two theory chapters about discourse arenas and ethics, coming up.



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4.

DISCOURSE ARENAS

Chapter 3 on Publics flagged the importance of understanding the material places in which public interest communication takes place. These places in which public interest communication occurs are often called ‘discourse arenas’ in communication theory (see Heath & Waymer, 2018) or ‘public arenas’ by French sociology scholars (see Cefaï, 2016). Such places include sites where civil society comes together, like public meetings, in rallies and street marches; by governments, in parliamentary meetings and courts; and through the many media channels available today. Arenas provide the opportunity for public problems to be aired and for publics to work individually or collectively to argue different interests and ideas. In turn, we might use the expression ‘public interest communication *in action*’ to describe how these places – whether physical or mediated – become places of action.

They have provided forums for public debate for centuries – from the ancient Greeks in the Agora or city centre; to Speaker’s Corner in London’s Hyde Park, originating in 1866 with a protest; and the many speeches given to audiences in the modern area at rallies and marches.



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=39#h5p-23>

Click on the slideshow to see images of public debate over the millenia. From the Greek orators, to the many voices spoken at the famous Speaker’s Corner, Hyde Park, London, to the American suffragettes and democratic activists around the globe, free and open public debate is a critical component of public interest communication.

With the rise of the online world, speaker’s corners have continued to evolve. Now, public interest communication can take place in any corner of the internet. So long as an individual has internet access, they are able to voice their concerns and create discourse arenas in any online context. These can range from social media sites such as TikTok, Instagram and Facebook, or to the ‘dark web’, or mediated TED

talks that place experts before live and global audiences. Every hour of every day new materials are being uploaded online to prompt debate, share ideas and educate others.

Public exchange sites

Leading French sociologist [Daniel Cefaï](#) (2018) describes public arenas as: “conceived as a place for exchanging rational arguments, for the reflexive circulation of discourse, the expression of collective identities or the formation of public opinion”.

These places connect communication, publics and interests so closely that they are intermingled and almost impossible to tease apart. As Cefaï (2018) says, the [public arena becomes the product of acts of communication](#) while the public is created through carrying out performances and uttering arguments within the arena.

Consider the following example: the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, a festival which has become a celebrated global, cultural event. First held in Sydney in 1978 as a street protest for gay rights, resulting in violence and police arrests, it has evolved into a celebration of LGBTQI+ rights, with participation, inclusivity and partnerships at its core. In the 2020s, Mardi Gras presents a collection of social and political narratives, using a wide range of discourse arenas – from the televised street march held in February/March, to global media coverage, with events held in coffee shops, local businesses and entertainment venues all over the city – Mardi Gras has become a multifaceted network of events that celebrates the LGBTQI+ community (Johnston, 2020). As stated in its strategic plan: “Much has been achieved by LGBTQI communities since early activists took to the streets” (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, 2019). These changes are illustrated over decades of social change, illustrated in the festival’s themes: from ‘Power in the Darkness’ in 1979, to ‘Fearless’ 40 years later in 2019, and ‘United We Shine’ in 2022 (Johnston, 2023).

“Often embedded in decades of protest and lobbying, movements such as LGBTQI+ rights, brought to life in Mardi Gras, show how civil society can effect change through ongoing protest, publicity and debate,” (Johnston 2023).

As such, these arenas, while visually displayed as a festival, also become public interest battlegrounds, as outlined in the next section.

Discourse arenas of the 21st century: Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras



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Although arenas are highly diverse in nature they have several things in common. First, they are always in public and always before an audience; second; they present different types of expression and argumentation; third, they require reasons to be given through discussion or argument (Cefaï, 2018). Public arenas have been successful in providing space for public issues and problems to be aired by members of civil society, forcing governments to take ownership of problems, and providing opportunities for social change to occur. For example, consider the way animal rights have risen up the agenda in recent years with social and legal pressure brought to bear in favour of living conditions (such as free ranging for hens) also reflected in the rise in veganism. The arenas provide sites for the public exchange of ideas — e.g public protests, media, websites, media developed by activist groups like Voiceless, industry lobbying and so on.

Public arenas certainly do not present simple solutions, but they do present places and opportunities for public communication to take place. As such, they are as much about raising attention as they are about finding solutions or outcomes. Cefaï calls this part of *problem-centered democracies* in which **pragmatic solutions** are sought.

Podcast by Michaela Cameron: Using the economic arena to help alleviate poverty in Kenya



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=39#audio-39-1>

In this podcast Michaela Cameron tells the inspiring story of [Nice Coffee Co](#), a social enterprise which uses the economic arena to empower Kenyans, build their economic agency and construct pathways out of poverty. Nice Coffee Co uses their product as a channel for educating others about the problem of poverty then enabling consumers in other countries to help alleviate this problem by purchasing their product.

Read more about how the Bond university business and commerce student Jim Chapman launched The Nice Coffee Co in the article '[Bondy brews good coffee and good will for Nairobi school children](#)'.



We do life-changing coffee.

Breaking the cycle of poverty, with every cup.

Nice Coffee Co information from website

This example highlights how public exchange sites can occur in many different arenas and many different channels. Whether through policy change, protest and advocacy, or economic instruments, public exchange sites bring together ideas and individuals to find solutions to some of our most intractable problems.

Public interest battlegrounds

PR scholars Heath and Waymer describe discourse arenas as “public interest battlegrounds” (2018, p. 40) which enable public interest communication in three ways. First, they provide forums for advocacy and counter-advocacy. Second, they allow collaborative decision making as a form of deliberative democracy. Third, they allow for issues to be redefined through competing perspectives. In all, they say: “the process should improve the understanding of facts, values, policies and identifications” (2018, p. 41).

But as with everything in the public interest, things are rarely simple. Discourse arenas can become co-opted to hidden or alternative interests through what political philosopher Jurgen Habermas calls “systematically distorted communication” (1998, p. 168). Good examples of this exist in what we know as ‘astroturfing’, ‘green washing’ and ‘fake news’. In these instances, what might appear to be *real arenas* with *real debate* can be either infiltrated by interests that are not what they appear to be or by the manipulation of facts. We explain them here, using Johnston & Rowney’s definitions (2018, p. 279):

Astroturfing: Fabricating grassroots support for a campaign or issue, based on the idea that support can be developed by starting a trend—a fake one, which is usually paid for. Here’s a great TED talk that explores this issue called [Astroturf and manipulation of media messages](#).

Greenwashing: Modelled on the word ‘whitewash’. Deceptively presenting an organisation, brand or product as though it is ‘green’ or environmentally friendly in a deliberate and unethical way.

Fake news: Deliberate misinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media or social media, written and published with the intention of misleading in order to gain attention and remove the focus from real news.

These examples are the antithesis of public interest communication, often led by powerful organisations or sectors which seek to suppress the positions of the less powerful. Heath and Waymer use the example of strategic disinformation campaigns used by the oil sector in the climate change debate where “discord benefits enterprise and weakens the agency of society” (2018, p. 43).

The times are a-changing

The contribution that arenas provide to enable public interest communication is often central to either ‘evolutionary’ or ‘revolutionary’ change. Consider the following examples.

Evolutionary change: this is slow change, for example illustrated in the slow adoption of same-sex marriage globally. While this issue has been on many countries’ agendas for decades, there are currently only 29 countries where same-sex marriage is legal: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Uruguay, according to [Human Rights Campaign](#). Denmark was first to legalize civil partnerships for same-sex couples in 1989, which moved to same-sex marriage in June 2012 (Johnston 2016). So, while marriage equality has gained momentum, if you consider that there are 195 countries in the world, and only 29 countries having legislated for change, that’s less than 15% of countries that have legalised marriage equality.

Questions to consider about the evolutionary change of same-sex marriage legislation:

- In what arenas might this social change have occurred?
- Who were the main publics involved?
- Why do you think this has been a slow-moving social change?



Revolutionary change: this is fast change, illustrated in the rise in digital media and the internet. Once the use of computers became dominant in the 1980s, computer technology became an immovable force in all sectors of global society. At the start of 2021 there were 4.66 billion active internet users worldwide, equaling 59.5% of the global population. [Statista](#) reports that Northern Europe ranks first with a 96% internet penetration rate among the population

Questions to consider about the revolutionary change of the digital world:

- While this is about media arenas, in what other arenas would the discussion about digital media have taken place?
- What interests were at play?
- Why do you think this has been a fast-moving social change?

[illegible]

Discourse or public arenas present many versions of public opinion and provide the opportunity for issues, problems and causes to be made public, debated and to evolve. As such, social change occurs over time – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly – driven by public interest groups and individuals who push and pull in a tug-of-war fashion. John Dewey observed that: “Social change is here as a fact ... changes that are revolutionary in effect are in process in every phase of life” (1991, p. 61). Importantly, he added, this communication must be done “out in the open” (Dewey, 1927, p. 81). This is a central element of public interest communication – the publicness with which they occur – acted out within discourse arenas in which publics have their say.



<https://ug.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=39#h5p-6>

5.

ETHICS

Those who've studied ethics previously will be aware that there are rarely simple solutions to ethical dilemmas. This actually sits well within the framework for this book as public interest communication is as much about **reflexive practice** and challenging existing thinking as it is about coming up with absolute answers. Rather, public interest is often about balancing different interests, and ethical philosophies can provide conceptual toolkits to assist this process. As US ethics scholar Russ Shafer-Landau says: "We must know how to balance options that generate different goods, on the assumption that there is more than just one kind of intrinsic value" (2013, p. 612).

Johnston (2016) points out how **utilitarian** concepts might at first seem to equate best with notions of public interest because of the utilitarian principles that actions are right if they lead to the *greatest possible good* (or the least possible bad). However, this presents problems with also balancing the needs of pluralist and diverse societies where the majority can overlook the interests of minorities or those who are less represented in the system. Therefore, a shift away from universalising – in which most people might 'win' – is found in the understanding that plurality and heterogeneity lie at the heart of many contemporary societies. This presents a logical interface with how we view society as *many publics*, where in any given interest clash, there will be publics and counter-publics that see the same problem or issue very differently.

US Scholar Linda Hon neatly sums up the links between public interest communication and ethics. She argues:

Public interest communications is distinguished by a commitment to communication that advances the human condition. Public interest communications embraces the vision of ethicists who make explicit the priority of shared human values and rights over vested interests that deliberately seek to obfuscate or have as their goal the denial of any person or group of people the fundamental human rights of dignity, freedom, equality and quality of life including health and safety. (cited in Fessmann, 2016, p. 13).

The approach sits comfortably with Dewey's 'pragmatic idealism' outlined in an earlier chapter. However, we do note it is aspirational in nature and, as we move forward, we find the messy nature of society rarely makes things this simple in ethical dilemmas.

Podcast: Jess Laven on A Place to Call Home



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Listen to the following podcast by Jess Laven, which explores the wicked problem of homelessness around the world.

The need to find balance when faced with ethical dilemmas will oftentimes place ethics and law at odds with each other; sometimes ‘national interests’ in law will compete with humanitarian interests; and most definitely publics will clash with each other. The issue of asylum seekers provides a good example. The Ethics Centre considers [this situation in Australia](#) while the Centre’s Executive Director Simon Longstaff says ‘[asylum is fundamentally about the public and personal good of human safety](#)’. Among the many questions raised on this issue is whether or not governments will allow asylum seekers to receive refugee status and on what grounds will they make such determinations?

Let’s look at a case study.

Case study: The Murugappan family

This is a story of a Tamil family who sought refugee status to stay in the town of Biloela in Queensland, Australia. The Murugappans are a family of four: mother Priya, father Nades, and their two daughters Kopika and Tharnicaa. The family – reported by the [BBC](#) as Australia’s “most famous asylum seekers” – were moved from Biloela and held in detention for four years. A highly successful social media campaign, based around the hashtag #HometoBilo, a petition with 350,000 signatures, and a change of government in 2022 resulted in a happy ending for the family when they were granted permanent visas and allowed to return to Biloela to live. It was heralded a win for “people power”. It did not result in a change to immigration policies but was considered on the basis of “complex and specific” circumstances.



Figure 1: A protest demanding that the Murugappan family be released

Do some preliminary research on this case study and review previous chapters, then work through the following questions:

1. What were the main clashing interests in this case?
2. Who were the main publics and counter-publics in this conundrum?
3. If the town of Biloela had consistently supported the family staying there, why do you think the former Australian government stood firm on its decision to not grant the family a permanent visa?

What is ethics?

Ethics itself is a branch of philosophy which investigates ideas, concepts and arguments around what constitutes right and wrong / good and bad. Approaches to understanding what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’ as well as what moral concepts such as justice, duty and virtue mean, differ across cultures and within communities. But, as we have seen elsewhere in the book, the idea of thinking in binaries can be very delimiting.

Some ethics scholars such as Martin Peterson (2023) suggest that some acts are neither right nor wrong, but rather they are a bit of both. He calls this ‘the gray area’ of ethics which moves away from the **binary** thinking where every situation has a wholly right or wrong pathway. Peterson (2023) talks about “gradable

notions of right and wrong” which take into consideration nuance within moral conflicts. Consider the case of the Murugappan family, illustrated above, in which an *absolute* position of ‘wrong’ was held by the Australian government during their detention because they had broken Australian immigration law. However, when the public support for the family, the need for flexibility, and consideration of the case on its merits were evaluated, the level of ‘wrongness’ was balanced against the level of ‘rightness’ of their particular case and they were allowed to return to their community.

As the above case study demonstrates, ethical dilemmas are woven into the decisions made by individuals, organisations and institutions every day. It is not surprising then, that the examination of ethical complexities has been a preoccupation of thinkers since humanity’s first records were created. This timeline provides a brief history of key moments in the evolution of ethical theorising around the globe.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=41#h5p-21>

There are many types of ethical philosophies: **utilitarianism**, summarised above, sometimes called **consequentialism**; **deontology**; and **virtue ethics** are the three best known. They are [explained](#) here, also in a crash course in this video on [virtue ethics](#), and in the following video about [Virtue Ethics by The Ethics Centre](#). This video considers the question ‘What makes something right or wrong?’ As The Ethics Center notes;

One of the oldest ways of answering this question comes from the Ancient Greeks. They defined good actions as ones that reveal us to be of excellent character. What matters is whether our choices display virtues like courage, loyalty, or wisdom. Importantly, virtue ethics also holds that our actions shape our character. The more times we choose to be honest, the more likely we are to be honest in future situations – and when the stakes are high. (The Ethics Center, 2021).



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=41#oembed-1>

Codes versus virtue ethics

In our consideration of ethics and public interest communication we will focus on virtue ethics; in particular on how ‘agent based’ ethics sits in contrast with professional codes of ethics. Because codes are based on rule-following they fall into the category of deontology.

The two pathways can be understood in the following ways:

1. Code-based framework (Codes of Ethics) – This is considered a profession or industry’s contract with society. It is part of a profession or industry’s internal self-regulation which also provides a

common reference point amongst members. Codes require practitioners to interpret the rules which are not usually explained in detail. Codes may be known as rule-based or action-based ethics.

2. Agent-based ethics (Virtue Ethics) – This leaves ethical decision-making up to the individual to use their own internal barometer of what is ethically right and wrong, based on their character, motivation and, importantly, their habits of practice. It is based around ideas from Greek philosopher Aristotle in determining what was virtuous behaviour in leading a virtuous life.

Both ethical routes provide pathways to interpret public interest. Codes of ethics often incorporate how to work for the public interest into their aims. For example, a global study of public relations codes by Johnston (2016) found 31 out of 84 codes of ethics or conduct made reference to ‘public interest’ or ‘interests of the public/s’. The study found that many countries cited two international codes: the Code of Athens and the Code of Lisbon, which were created by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in 1965 and 1978 respectively. Here’s how they incorporated the public interest.

The [Code of Athens](#) calls for a balance between the interests of public and the organisation: “To act, in all circumstances, in such a manner as to take account of the respective interests of the parties involved: both the interests of the organization which he serves and the interests of the publics concerned.”

The [Code of Lisbon](#) on the other hand distinguishes between public and individual interests, saying: “He/she likewise undertakes to act in accordance with the public interest and not to harm the dignity or integrity of the individual.”

These, and other codes, provide useful ways of presenting a summary of public interest. However, they are also limited in what they can achieve. Some PR scholars have advocated using virtue ethics over codes because of the unresolved conflicts surrounding *interests to client and the public* found within codes (see Harrison and Galloway, 2005, in [Public relations ethics: A simpler \(but not simplistic\) approach to the complexities](#)). More broadly, codes have been criticised for a number of reasons including lacking the capacity to anticipate situations; being too simplistic; not providing real solutions; being poorly communicated; not being able to impose sanctions or punish breaches; and by being vague, imprecise and making lofty statements.

Virtue ethics on the other hand provide an alternate pathway drawn from the *actor* rather than the *action*. Virtue ethics call on the individual to use good judgement in ethical decision making, rather than being prescribed by a professional or industry code. They call on Aristotle’s idea of moral virtue based on ‘habits’ that result in doing virtuous acts. Instead of focusing on the question of ‘what should I do?’ when faced with an ethical decision, Aristotle’s primary concern was ‘how should we live?’ A major strength of this agent-based virtue ethics therefore lies in embedding ethical behaviour into our lives, placing virtue ethics beyond the industry or profession. This sits best for public interest communication which is not industry-specific but rather a way of thinking and doing communication (Johnston, 2018).

Of course, this can be very difficult to disentangle in practice. One way of imagining how we might respond to ethical choices is to engage in ‘thought experiments’. Centuries of philosophical debate around ethical issues has led to the development of classic thought experiments on dilemmas which challenge our ability to make ethical choices.

Test yourself with the following experiment and [visit this site](#) to delve more deeply into how you, and others, make ethical choices in a range of complex scenarios.



Figure 2: Thought experiment reproduced from www.philosophyexperiments.com. Click [here](#) to enter your decision and view result.

Managing (Dis)information

In reality the question of *code vs virtue ethics* is not a simple 'either-or' decision. Rather, both can be useful to the communication practitioner and codes are a part of professional life and should be part of ethical training. The virtue ethics approach however is most useful when we decouple ethics from the professional role in pursuing public interest communication as individuals trying to do the right thing.

An essential part of effective public interest communication is to practice active listening while considering the validity of the information which informs individual's ethical positions. But what happens when false or misleading information is introduced into a debate? How can that affect our ability to use judgement in our ethical decision making? We have heard more and more about the impact of disinformation and false arguments on democratic debate and beliefs around important issues such as vaccination. Consider the long running debate surrounding the [impact of disinformation on the 2016 U.S. Presidential election campaign](#).

However, detecting these tricks and identifying how they can affect our own ethical decision making can be very difficult. Can you spot it when it happens to you? Watch and play the following interactive 'Debate Den' video to find out.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=41#h5p-4>



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=41#h5p-5>

PART II

PUBLIC INTEREST COMMUNICATION IN ACTION

6.

WICKED PROBLEMS

The concept of ‘wicked problems’ was first proposed by planning engineers Horst Rittel and Melville Webber in 1973 to contrast the difference between ‘tame’ problems – which could be resolved using standard scientific techniques – and complex, policy-based problems – which were neither simply nor completely resolvable. They said because wicked problems exist within pluralistic societies there was no way of knowing what was an “undisputable public good” and there was no clear picture of what “equity” meant when making decisions (1973, p. 155).

Wicked problems may have emerged from urban policy planning, but they are now used to describe social, political, environmental and economic problems more broadly. These problems are typically surrounded by disagreement, inadequate or conflicting information, large numbers of stakeholders and webs of interconnected interests. The Australian Government defines a wicked problem as a problem which is “highly resistant to resolution” (2018).

While not everyone agrees with the somewhat simplistic distinction between ‘wicked’ and ‘tame’, the concept does give us a way of categorizing and thinking about complex problems. Moreover, it proposes that we use a **problematization** approach which calls for consideration from many viewpoints while constantly reflecting during the process of problem-solving. Much of the thinking that has continued about wicked problems has elements in common with public interest problems, with **problematization** at the centre, and, correspondingly, the need for effective and multi-faceted public interest communication.

Here is a useful explanation:

‘Wickedness isn’t a degree of difficulty . . . A wicked problem has innumerable causes, is tough to describe, and doesn’t have a right answer . . . Environmental degradation, terrorism, and poverty—these are classic examples of wicked problems’. (Camillus, 2008, p. 1).

Here are the ten reasons Horst and Webber gave to describe wicked problems.

1. There is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem.
2. Wicked problems are often ongoing.
3. Solutions to wicked problems are not true or false, good or bad.
4. There is no immediate and no ultimate test of a solution to a wicked problem.
5. All attempts to find solutions have effects that may not be reversible.

6. Wicked problems do not have a set of solutions.
7. Every wicked problem is essentially unique.
8. Every wicked problem can be considered to be a symptom of another problem.
9. There are many explanations for wicked problems.
10. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. (see Johnston & Glenny, 2021 for this summary; adapted from Rittel & Webber, 1973)

As such, wicked problems do not have complete, technical solutions because they involve competing underlying values and interests which often present paradoxes that require tough choices between opposing ideas. Listen to the following podcast for an overview of how different groups and individuals make these tough choices regarding homelessness.

Podcast: Madeleine Wright investigates the wicked problem of homelessness



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=53#audio-53-1>

In this podcast Madeleine takes a 'glocal' look at homelessness, reporting on how 'Rosies – Friends of the Street' helps the homeless in Brisbane, Australia. She explains the difficult and complex issue of homelessness: "You can't just give people a home. It's a far deeper issue". Madeleine explores how working with homeless people at the local level emerges from the first of the UN Sustainability Goals, listed below — No Poverty. Listen to Madeleine's interview with Rosie's board member Bob Elliott who says the problem of homelessness may not be solvable but "we can address and solve some of the symptoms".

Not solving wicked problems

However, just because wicked problems cannot be categorically or fully resolved, they still need to be managed. We don't throw our arms up in the air and say: 'forget climate change because it's too hard' or 'terrorism will always be around so why bother trying to mitigate it?'. And it is the management of these complex problems, that includes effective communication at many levels, and with many publics, that is important.

How we communicate about wicked problems can make a difference. Different voices need to be heard because there is always a range of publics and interests involved in any wicked problem. However,

adversarial tactics which rely on ‘good-versus-bad’ or ‘us-versus-them’ approaches can create misunderstandings and undue polarization (Turnbull & Hoppe, 2019). When this occurs and ideas are represented as ‘binaries’, or opposites, they can exacerbate difference and be unproductive. Let’s take a look at the wicked problem of smoking: still a wicked problem but one that has been addressed over decades of strategic management and communication. This complex public health issue also illustrates how the public interest in an issue can change over time when new knowledge and changing social mores drive shifts in acceptable public behaviours.

Australia’s National Tobacco Strategy

In 1997 Australia’s National Tobacco Strategy was established to attack the wicked problem of smoking.

It required **adaptive change** because smoking was entrenched in the social fabric of Australian society. It included regulation to control promotion, developing taxation, establishing health warnings and pharmacotherapies, setting up cessation services such as helplines, and information campaigns. Part of the strategy was to become the first country to legislate plain packaging of cigarettes in 2012 (Australian Government, 2018).

Today smoking remains a problem but the scope of its ‘wickedness’ has been reduced. This has included the deliberative and purposeful engagement with stakeholders, including helping those who want to give up make the change.

Watch the [short video from the BBC](#) where Dr Paul Harrison from Deakin University explains why plain packaging on cigarettes is expected to reduce smoking over time.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=53#oembed-1>

Perhaps it’s no surprise that the wicked problem of tobacco has re-emerged as a new, related wicked problem – vaping or e-cigarette use. Check out the list above — wicked problems don’t just disappear. However, they are also unique. We could say the same for vaping – smoking of a different kind, right? In mid-2024 the Australian Government brought in legislation to significantly restrict the sale of e-cigarettes throughout the country. The government had previously announced “strong action to reduce smoking and stamp out vaping – particularly among young Australians – through stronger legislation, enforcement, education and support” (<https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-mark-butler-mp/media/taking->

action-on-smoking-and-vaping). The Federal Health Minister further said “Australia needs to reclaim its position as a world leader on tobacco control” (Butler, 2023).

Under the new laws, from 1 July 2024, e-cigarettes may only be sold in pharmacies, and only to over-18s without a prescription. They will also follow the same path as cigarettes and move to plain packaging, with the removal of most flavoured vapes from the market. A doctor from Harvard Medical School [commented that](#): “Perhaps vaping should be viewed as a ‘lesser of evils’ for current cigarette smokers. Still, it’s clear that there is a lot about vaping we don’t know...It took many years to recognize the damage cigarettes can cause. We could be on a similar path with vaping,” (Shmerling, 2023).

Vaping and e-cigarettes: Views on Australia’s 2024 new laws



The issue of vaping and e-cigarettes is now a hot-button topic. Australia’s decision has sparked global interest including from the media, as shown by these videos:

- CNA: [Australia to ban recreational vaping as part of a major crackdown](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35GbHBinJnQ) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35GbHBinJnQ)
- Behind the News: [Australia's new vape ban explained](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVEumtp2dSM). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVEumtp2dSM)
- ABC News In-depth: [Will Australia's new vaping laws work?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVEumtp2dSM) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVEumtp2dSM)

watch?v=aLkEDvccl_Q)

As you watch, consider the communication and media content surrounding these decisions in light of the 10-points above. What do different stakeholders think? **What are your views?**

Communication and wicked problems

In recent thinking from communication scholars, two dominant models of managing wicked problems have been identified: these are 1. external expertise and 2. advocacy. However, while experts and advocates are critical resources for problem-solving, they are not sufficient for wicked problems. Carcasson therefore adds a third option: **deliberative democracy** (2016). Such a perspective envisions democracy as an ongoing collaborative process of constant communication and negotiation focused on solving common problems, rather than an adversarial zero-sum exercise between stable, competing interests, or a technocratic world of experts searching for the best solutions.

These perspectives, which include expert-led, advocate-led, and community-led approaches, share common ground with the work of early leading democracy scholars [Walter Lippmann](#) and John Dewey (see [Chapter 1](#)) who saw public interest achieved via different routes. Lippmann chose the expert-led route; while Dewey saw deliberation, driven by the public, as the best way to achieve desired public interest outcomes (Johnston & Pieczka, 2018).

However, as Carcasson and Sprain suggest: “Rather than attempting to solve wicked problems, communities need better processes for discovering, understanding, and managing the tensions and paradoxes inherent within systemic, value-laden problems” (2016, p. 41).

Communication and working with the existing tensions, rather than against them, might thus provide strategies for dealing with wicked problems.

These may include the following points:

1. Collective action – involving a range of actors and groups which share common values or goals, to bring about change.
2. Adaptive change – requiring new ways of thinking and learning, and preparedness to consider different solutions.
3. Deliberative engagement – bringing together citizens or those affected in a community with the decision-makers or officials.
4. Taking a ‘glocal’ approach – understanding that many wicked problems are global but need to be managed at a local level.
5. Breaking down the problem – creating categories, sub-categories and an incremental approach to a problem is not so overwhelming.
6. Moving away from **binary** thinking — where strict divisions of good and bad, right and wrong, can undermine problem-solving.

7. Developing ongoing aims and objectives – in breaking down the problem consider **SMART** objectives to provide something to aim toward, keeping in mind that wicked problems will probably defy some of these.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, the United Nations adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, or Global Goals) which centre on protecting the planet, ending poverty, hunger and discrimination, and tackling injustice and inequality, by the year 2030.

These are the goals:



Figure 1: The 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

With the exception of Goal 17, these are also wicked problems: none can be solved in a simple, linear, quick, or uniform way. What's more, the problems embedded within the goals are interlinked, which makes them all the more complicated and difficult to resolve. Nearly 200 countries which have signed up to these goals will undertake advancing them in different, culturally sensitive ways that can be applied at local levels.

The declaration of the goals, including the vision, principles, and how the partnership is envisaged (see Goal 17) is explained here: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

The United Nations website provides an extensive list of case studies demonstrating how local communities have developed best practices to advance the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Visit the site to explore a few of these examples, including:

- [Addressing Violence against women in Bangladesh](#)
- [Energy efficiency and renewable energy sources in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)
- [Creative industries alleviate poverty in Peru](#)

After reviewing these case studies visit <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>. Consider the following task and questions:

1. Read the plan of action at the above link and explain how the goals link to people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership.
2. Use a 'glocal' approach to think of ways to manage these global problems at a local level.



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=53#h5p-10>

7.

ADVOCACY AND ACTIVISM

Social movements have played a critical role in challenging dictators, advancing democracy, gaining rights and addressing environmental issues in communities around the globe. Many of us celebrate and enjoy the benefits achieved through the efforts of past social movement participants before us: Women around the world have engaged in hunger strikes, demonstrations, and community canvassing to secure the same rights as their male counterparts, with a century of achievements accrued in response. In more recent decades social movements have won LGBTIQ+ and disability rights, democratic freedoms and elevated demands for the rights of nature. Social movements have changed the world many times over. Which of the following have you heard of? Can you put them in the order in which they happened?



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=47#h5p-26>

You may have noticed that it can be difficult to decide when social movements start and end. This is because often movements may emerge many years after people begin to engage in advocacy.

Advocacy is the core activity of all social movements: the “act of persuading or arguing in support of a specific cause, policy, idea or set of values” (Cox & Pezzullo, 2016, p.177). **Advocacy**, like all forms of public interest communication, takes place in complex, dynamic discourse arenas. These arenas include the social environments and physical settings where advocates’ interactions with other individuals and groups generate particular decisions or outcomes (Jasper, 2019). It is when individuals come together and advocate for change on a particular shared cause, that a social movement is formed. Other components of these social movements include **campaigns**, **tactics** and **outcomes**.

But what is the difference between advocacy and activism? Advocacy becomes activism when it takes a specific form within a discourse arena.

‘Activism is defined as the use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one’ (Cambridge Dictionary).

In practice these definitions are often used differently in different nations and contexts. This is because social movements are inherently extremely complicated systems, composed of a multitude of actions undertaken by a multitude of actors, operating within disparate groups and factions, all with potentially

different motivations and goals (Louis et al., 2020). It is both the gift of public interest communication that individuals can become advocates for a cause close to their heart, and the challenge to public interest communicators to ensure that their messages are heard and respected. In the following Q&A video Jane and Robyn talk about the distinction between activism and advocacy and how it fits into the broader concept of public interest communication.

Interview on activism and advocacy and how these align with public interest communication



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=47#oembed-1>

Activism categories

Activism can take different forms in different countries, and can lead to different responses in different countries. In pluralist societies with open political systems, publics are provided avenues to voice dissent and advocate for their cause. In these societies activism can include activities such as joining political parties, writing submissions, marching in rallies, signing petitions and forming new public interest groups. These activities may not be possible in other societies. For example, while our analysis of public interest communication in this book focuses primarily on pluralistic, democratic societies, activists in other societies around the world experience violence and suppression at frightening rates (Global Witness, 2019). In many countries ‘activism’ may not be possible, and may, in fact, be heavily suppressed.

Given this complexity, forms of activism are loosely grouped into two overarching categories: conventional actions (also called ‘normative’, or ‘institutional’) and radical actions (also called ‘non-normative’, ‘extra-institutional’, or ‘civil resistance’ in its non-violent form, Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009).

The campaign for sustainable palm oil

Listen to this podcast by Mya-Darly Ngwe about the campaign to demand sustainable palm oil in our consumer products. She examines how local citizens can be part of the UN Sustainability Goal for ‘Sustainable Production and Consumption’, interviewing activist Tracey Bailey who founded Biome ecostores.



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<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=47#audio-47-1>

- Conventional actions
 - activities which use legal, or institutional channels to promote the cause. For example, in Australia it is legal to hold rallies, organise petitions and vote in local, state and federal elections. Engaging in these sorts of activities could be considered conventional activism.
- Radical actions
 - actions which operate outside conventional, legal, or institutions channels of change. In many countries it is illegal to form a blockade, to barricade a motorway or occupy government buildings, therefore these would be classified as radical actions.

However, such a simple division between conventional and radical activism is easier said than done. Some actions which are conventional in one context will be radical in another.

Consider the following quiz: how you would categorise these types of activism if they took place in your country?



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<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=47#h5p-27>

Activism and advocacy involves more than just holding rallies and petitions. There are many other things activists must do to advance their cause, which include:

- Design campaigns
- Implement actions to persuade others of the justness of their cause
- Motivate supporters to join their cause
- Seek support from third parties such as the media and other interest groups
- Suppress/avoid counter-mobilisation
- Avoid radicalisation and factionalism within their own ranks

Activists also have to create groups in order to organise and undertake their actions. These groups can be highly diverse organisational structures ranging from informal teams of friends, loosely structured ‘grass roots’ organisations, or large NGOs or formal networks. Many of these groups may have many resources such as money and access; most, however, will have little of either and have a heavy dependency on volunteer labour and skill (Gulliver et al., 2020). Furthermore, much of what is reported in the media

and that we hear about on a day to day basis are radical actions, as they are newsworthy and can generate significant debate and discussion across multiple discourse arenas.

What do you think is the most common type of activism that actually takes place? In 2018 Robyn did an analysis of the Australian environmental movement to ask this exact question. Scroll through the following slides to find out what she found.



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=47#h5p-24>

Advocacy ‘works’ when advocates are able to persuade others that their cause is just. It is not about competition; but instead about the ability of different public interest groups to engage the goals and interests of other players in the arena (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2015). There is a rich body of research around the particular dynamics of social movements and how they take advantage of opportunities within arenas (such as [‘political opportunity theory’](#) and [‘resource mobilisation theory’](#)). There are some opportunities which have been shown to be particularly important: The existence of political allies, supportive public opinion and favourable media coverage all represent opportunities which can determine the effectiveness of protest in achieving its goals (Agnone, 2007; Johnson, Agnone, & McCarthy, 2010). These characteristics reflect particular arenas and other groups that advocates must engage with, as well as some of the challenges they face in each.

The policy arena

Many activist campaigns seek to elicit policy change and/or target political entities (Gulliver, Fielding, & Louis, 2019). Groups active in this arena include policy makers and government departments, as well as lobby groups, think tanks and corporations (Dobbin & Jung, 2015). The challenge for many advocacy groups is gaining access to this arena; even in the case of mass public support for a cause, such as opposition to involvement in the 2003-2011 Iraq war, for example, it can be difficult to achieve political influence.

The media arena

Favourable media coverage is important for building public support and mobilising other people to join the advocates cause. Traditional and social media channels can help shape public opinion, which has been shown to then influence politician's responses to the cause (Burstein, 2003). Groups operating within the media arena can include media conglomerates, broadcasters and publishers, as well as intellectuals and experts. A challenge for advocates in this arena is maintaining media interest, which can require a constant reinvention of new protest types, each of which need to be more radical, disruptive and attention grabbing than the last (Andrews & Caren, 2010; Lester & Hutchins, 2012)

The advocacy network arena

Other advocacy groups offer an important source of support, whether financial, emotional or practical. Gaining support from other advocacy groups enable strong and sustainable coalitions, which can increase advocates ability to gain power and achieve their goals (Tarrow & Tilly, 2007). Groups within the advocacy network arena can include NGOs, other grassroots groups focusing on similar causes, identity groups such as religious or ethnic groups, or trans-national advocacy organisations and coalitions. This arena can be a positive source of support for groups as well as an ongoing challenge; the formation and dissolution of like-minded coalitions is a constant feature of social movement dynamics.

What does advocacy and activism achieve?

Why do some movements grow, build power and achieve their goals, while others shrink and eventually dissipate? There is a large body of literature crossing a multiplicity of research fields looking into the factors that influence social movement mobilization and the achievement of movement goals. Bill Moyer's Movement Action Plan (1987) described eight stages of a social movement, and was designed to help activists chose the most effective tactics and strategies to match their movement's stage. The following image matches the eight stages with public awareness, public opposition and public support.

KEY NEGOTIATIONS IN MULTI-STAKEHOLDER MOVEMENTS
 based on Bill Moyes *Movement Action Plan*

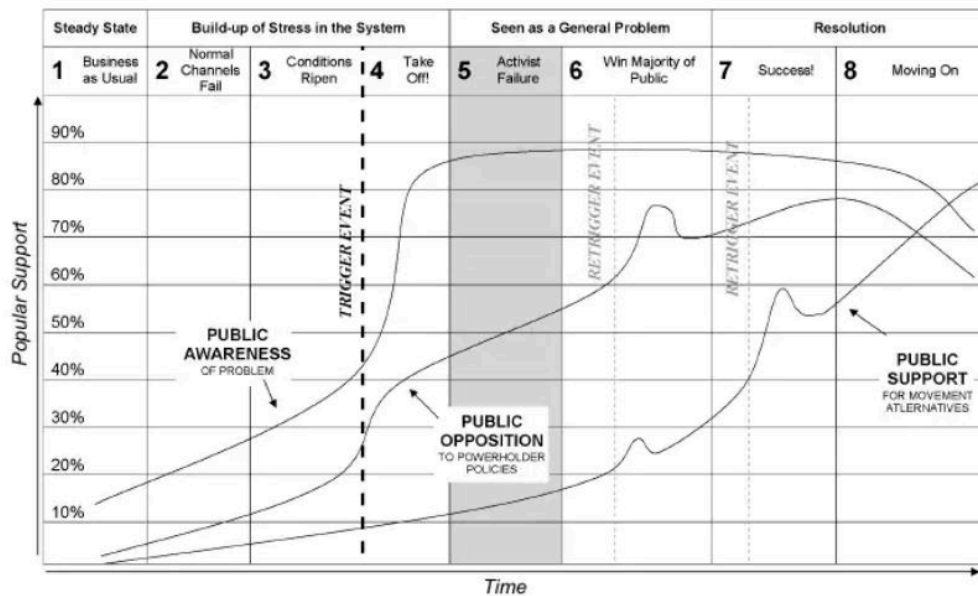


Figure 1: In this figure David Eaves demonstrates how the public change in response to eight phases of social movements. You can read more about Moyer's Movement Action Plan on The Commons Social Change Library site <https://commonslibrary.org/resource-bill-moyers-movement-action-plan/>.

Despite our understanding of how movements may grow and change over time it remains difficult to measure whether advocacy is actually successful. Like all public interest communication, advocacy is a dynamic process of listening and responding to other's interests. This process can seek to achieve quite intangible results, such as gaining greater sympathy for their cause, or motivating volunteers to participate more frequently in activist activities.

However, there is one way to measure outcomes: by analysing the specific goals of selected campaigns and tracking whether these goals are achieved. This work has been undertaken by a team of researchers in Australia (Gulliver, Fielding & Louis, 2019). Their analysis demonstrated that many campaigns do, in fact, achieve their goals.

While it is not possible to determine whether the goals were achieved because of the advocacy itself, or for some other reason, this analysis indicates that advocacy is able to engage successfully in public interest communication and achieve success. Click on the image to learn more about the analysis of the climate change campaigns and their outcomes.

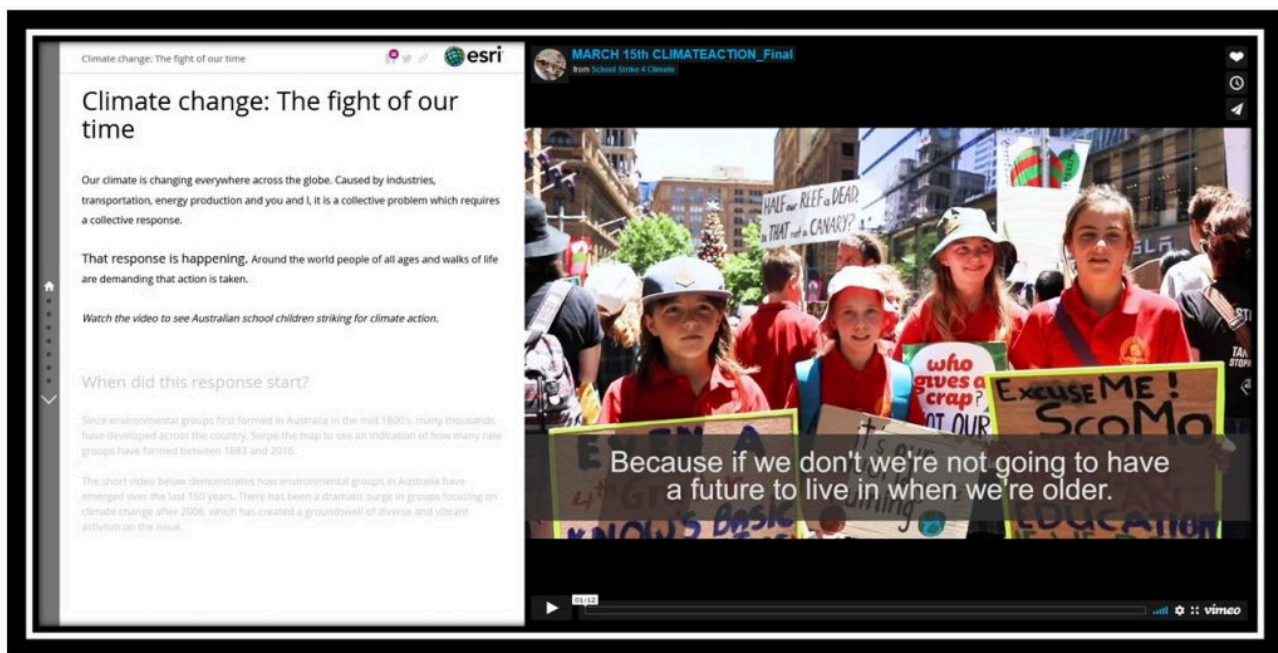


Figure 2: [View the storymap](https://arcg.is/0b8X5L) on climate change activism (https://arcg.is/0b8X5L)

What happens when advocacy doesn't achieve its goals?

In many situations interest groups do not feel heard despite free and open opportunities to engage in debate in public arenas. For some activists, their perceptions of failure have led to an increasing use of ‘civil resistance’; often involving breaking the law as part of their advocacy.

And, of course, in other cases advocacy may turn to violence. When public debate is censored, or suppressed, or public arenas of debate are cut off and ignored, individuals and groups can turn to violent means. While research on the effectiveness of violent vs non-violent activism suggests that non-violent activism is far more effective at achieving its goals (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011), history shows that often activists may find that peaceful advocacy does not lead to success. Consider the dilemma activists are facing in some regions in Eastern-Europe and Central-Asia in their quest to implement safer drug policies and protections for minority groups. The following video from The Drug Reporter features the stories of resistance and survival of organisations and activists fighting for the human rights of vulnerable minorities.

The challenges of engaging in advocacy





One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=47#oembed-2>

As you watch the video consider these questions:

- If you were an advocate on any of these issues, what would you have done?
- What actions would you have taken?
- How would you respond to the crackdown on advocacy in these areas?
- What would you have done if your advocacy was unsuccessful?



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=47#h5p-11>

8.

PARTNERSHIPS AND ALLIANCES

Partnerships (and alliances) exist in every facet of our lives – from our relationships with our nearest and dearest, to coalitions between businesses and nonprofits, governments and nonprofits, like-minded public interest groups, business agreements and so on. They range from the local community action group, which brings together an alliance of environmentalists and anti-developers, to business sponsorships of sports and the arts, and corporations signing up to the **United Nations Global Compact**.

Partnerships provide the opportunity to combine resources, expand communication and membership reach, and boost credibility and reputation. They may be oriented towards business, the labour market, sustainable development, local issues, social problems – just about anything you can think of where people can benefit from coming together. Some concentrate on narrow local targets while others co-ordinate broad policy areas in large regions where millions of people live (OECD, 2006). The number of parties involved can therefore vary enormously: generally, the more partners, the more interests will be represented. In all cases, effective, fair and committed communication is a key factor in making partnerships work.

Podcast: Vivian Chen's Partnership for Peat



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=45#audio-45-1>

This podcast by Vivian Chen describes how slash and burn practices for clearing the land in some Southeast Asian countries has resulted in the loss of important peatland and other natural habitat. She describes how a partnership between the Peatland Restoration Agency, The University of Queensland and local villages have worked to coordinate and facilitate peatland restoration programs across Indonesian provinces. This program has helped progress sustainable development and build economically and environmental sustainable livelihoods for the people of Indonesia, although like many partnerships has faced difficulty in achieving its ambitious targets. After listening to the podcast you can learn more about the program and its

goals for the future in *The Conservation* article '[Indonesia's Peatland Restoration Agency gets an extension despite failing to hit its target: what are the hurdles and next strategies](#)' (2020), by Rini Astuti, David Taylor and Michelle Ann Miller.

Many other countries are also using this model to foster and embed sustainable environmental outcomes with economic and community development. The following image by the [Center for International Forestry Research](#) (CIFOR) shows a team of people in Singapore supported by the partnership to restore peatlands and thereby help reduce fire and habitat destruction.



CIFOR: Participatory Action Research to Community-Based Fire Prevention and Peatland Restoration

Making partnerships work

For partnerships to be successful, there are many factors that should come into play. From the start, partners need to hold shared values and common goals – otherwise they will not be a good fit. This has been described as a combination of mutuality and organisational identity.

- Mutuality encompasses the spirit of shared partnership principles;
- Organisational identity centers on the rationale for selecting particular partners and considers how the partnership value adds (Brinkerhoff, 2002).

For example, the social media app TikTok partnered with many large organisations during the COVID-19

pandemic, including the World Health Organisation, the Red Cross, UNICEF, The World Economic Forum, the scientific community's 'Team Halo', and others (TikTok, 2021). [TikTok](#) said "We're at our strongest when we work together, which is why we've partnered with a number of local and global organizations who are using TikTok to share trusted information with the community". Among the benefits to these organisations is the access to the target audience of TikTok; and for TikTok comes the credibility of partnering with NGO giants and keeping a high profile during the pandemic in combating misinformation.

Partnerships can be between two parties or many. An OECD report into partnerships explains how a multi-leveled, regional-based partnership may be designed to bring together many actors within a geographical location to contribute to a change initiative.

Firstly, to bring together all relevant actors is not an easy task as this implies having around one table not only different government institutions (usually of different levels) – many of which are traditionally competing with or ignoring each other – but also social partners, entrepreneurs, NGOs, the education and scientific sector, representatives of the civil society and many more. The interests of such partners, and therefore their approach to certain problems will usually be rather different (OECD, 2006).

This scenario illustrates the complex nature of making partnerships work. Partners will always have different priorities. Let's now apply this to a particular context: the implementation of a regional grid of electric car charging stations. There will be factors such as costings, the logistical placement of public charging stations, equitable access to members of the public including disabled drivers, town planning requirements, outsourcing to businesses, and so on. Each will represent different interests and priorities. If you imagine this group sitting around a table – perhaps 10 or 12 people – it is clear that the process of communication in dealing with this public policy initiative will be key. Think about some of the themes so far in this book: dialogue, listening, debate from the different actors or publics will all play a part in this discourse arena.

The OECD report identifies communication as one of the most important elements in a partnership, highlighting how critical it is that all voices in the partnership are heard. "What is clear is that the creation of an effective and long-lasting partnership requires a lot of thought, discussion, communication, understanding and mutual co-operation of partners" (2006, p. 29). Its report provides a comprehensive list of 17 features that make a successful partnership, many reflecting a public interest communication focus, including representation, inclusion, openness to new ideas, providing a forum for alternative voices, and more.

1. The partnership enjoys political and social acceptance.
2. The partners show determination and accept the practicalities of their political responsibilities.
3. There is a strong sense of ownership.
4. Agreements are based on identifiable responsibilities, joint rights and obligations, and are signed by all relevant partners.
5. The partnership takes an inclusive approach (relevant actors are involved in planning and implementation).

6. Strong commitment from each of the partners is reflected in the fact that all partner organisations are equally present and, where possible, represented by experienced persons who have influence within their organisation.
7. Responsibilities and the nature of co-operation are clarified.
8. The coordinators of the partnership are nominated by the partners.
9. Rules of conduct (e.g. good communication between actors, regular attendance of meetings, continuity of personnel, regular transfer of information among the partners) are adhered to by the partners.
10. Resources, responsibilities and tasks may differ, but the added value of the partnership to each partner is recognised.
11. Resources, knowledge, know-how and ideas are shared within the partnership.
12. Equal opportunities within the partnership are secured (partnerships will not necessarily succeed if one or a small number of the partners are perceived as dominant).
13. Adequate financial and human resources are available for implementation.
14. The partnership should be able to lever funding from a range of sources.
15. There is a firm foundation of good practice in financial controls, accounting procedures, human resource management, etc.
16. Resources and energy are devoted to monitoring and evaluation, on the basis of realistic but demanding performance indicators and targets which are clearly defined.
17. A 'learning culture' is fostered, i.e. one where all partners are able to learn from one another by allowing new ideas to come forward in an open exchange of experiences.

Corporate-nonprofit partnerships

Partnerships can be a way for members of the corporate sector to consolidate their **corporate citizenship** and **social responsibility** goals by partnering with nonprofits or community groups, just as outlined in the TikTok example, above. A study by US PR scholars McKeever and Remund (2019) into the corporate social responsibility aspects of partnering between corporates and nonprofits found that partnerships could be reframed as 'public interest partnerships' because of their focus on community over organisational interests. The study, [Partnerships in the Public Interest](#) found the three best practices for long term corporate-nonprofit relationships were:

- Working toward clarity at the outset and throughout the partnership.
- Striving for consistency in shared goals and storytelling about the partnership and its impact.
- Being comprehensive with the relationship by making an impact within a community.

They found it was important to prioritise community, have shared values, and keep reputations in mind, while not losing sight of public perception. The last of these points – public perception – is often highlighted when a partnership goes wrong. We hear about this when sponsorship partnerships are derailed due to one of the parties (usually the sponsee) acting in a way that is inconsistent with the values of the other partner (usually the sponsor). Among those that have hit the headlines are:

- [Cricket Australia's](#) test naming rights sponsor, Investment firm Magellan, cancelled its partnership when the team was exposed for ball-tampering. Magellan said the behaviour had been “inconsistent with our values”, ending its three-year deal.
- [Oscar Pistorius'](#) partnerships with sponsors – reportedly worth US\$4million – were cancelled when the South African Paralympian was charged with murder (and later found guilty of culpable homicide).

These examples and many others illustrate how communication, relationships, public perception and shared values are all interlinked, and how partnerships need ongoing attention, open and active channels of communication, and mutuality, to work. That said, this is not a magical recipe – if the shared principles of a partnership are lost, then it may be time for a partnership to be dismantled and for the process of partnering to being again.

A local partnership: Volunteering at Millstream National Park, Western Australia

The following video shows the outcomes of a partnership between different organisations in Western Australia. The Jirndawurrunha Park Council, composed of 12 members from the Yindibarndi and Nglauima, manage [Millstream Chichester National Park](#) in the [Pilbara region](#) alongside the WA Parks and Wildlife Services. This National Park is centered around 'Deep Reach' pool on the Fortescue River, a site revered and respected by Yindijbardndi and other nearby Aboriginal clans. The streams running through the Park regularly clog with invasive weeds which negatively impact on the unique wetlands and species which depend on it. This partnership was organised to enable volunteers to clear weeds and supported by local media and businesses.

Imagine you are responsible for arranging this partnership and delivering on its promises to help with the management of the park. Watch the video and then reflect on the questions below.



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Questions:

- What are the different interests of each of the main organisations involved? (Jirndawurrunha Park Council, WA Parks and Wildlife Services and Karratha Enviro Group)

- What do you think are the benefits of this partnership to each of those main organisations?
- What events or factors could jeopardise the partnership?
- What steps could the organisations take to ensure the partnership remains effective and long-lasting? (note: some responses to these questions can be found at the end of the chapter)

Finding balance

Like public interest, partnerships are about balance. While they present great opportunities for advancing interests of smaller nonprofit, charity or interest groups, there are risks that the more powerful partner (often a corporate partner) may be motivated by strategic benefits rather than doing good in the community. Some say corporate-nonprofit partnerships risk leaning away from “social” to “strategic”, signalling “the appropriation of the ‘social partnership’ in order to serve the purposes of business” (Seitanidi & Ryan 2007, p. 257). Therefore, for public interest communication to be served and maintained, there must be a mutually beneficial relationship in the partnership. The longevity of a partnership can often provide a pretty good litmus test for determining if partnerships have worked in the public interest.

While this chapter has focused on corporate-nonprofit partnerships, we should keep in mind that there are many combinations that make up partnerships. Government-community partnerships are common, often resulting in **community capacity building** which we examine in the next chapter. It’s been found that communities can gain significant benefits where, for example, government-community partnerships are strong, especially where communities are enabled via social inclusion partnerships in which communication plays a key role (Johnston, 2016).



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9.

CAPITAL AND CAPACITY BUILDING

The word capital has many meanings – from a place (e.g. capital city) to a form of punishment (e.g. the death penalty) and sometimes even a posh way of describing an idea (e.g. ‘what a capital idea!’). In this chapter we refer to capital as the accumulation of something – specifically we look at social capital, which brings together people and their relationships, and its close cousin capacity building, which puts social capital to work. Other capitals are economic/financial, human, intellectual, symbolic, cultural and natural. Because social capital focuses on like-minded people coming together for a mutually beneficial purpose it can help in building communities and even making them flourish. Central to all of this lies open and responsive communication which enables people to effectively connect. But because communities are **heterogenous**, that is made up of multiple interests and publics, individuals need to be open to the perspectives and methods of others, even when they share a mutual goal. You will recall examples of this from the previous chapter on partnerships. Public interest communication is at work when social capital and community capacity building find shared outcomes based on the process of this open, inclusive approach.

Social capital

While Aristotle and other Greek philosophers who spoke of civil society and social relations were among the first proponents of social capital, our contemporary understanding of it was explained by West Virginian school reformer L.J. Hanifan who commented in the early 20th century:

‘The individual is helpless socially ... If he may come into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community’. (1916, p. 131-32).

Hanifan then explained that the more “people do for themselves, the larger the community social capital will become, and the greater will be the dividends on the social investment” (1916, p. 138). Broadly, this is still how we understand social capital today. Others have gone on to popularize the concept of social capital such as American political scientist Robert Putnam whose book, [Bowling Alone](#), was about the disconnection to community in American society. At the heart of this was the need for social capital which he defined as having “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitates coordination and cooperation” (1995, p. 67).

Take for example how a ‘people-centred’ approach to development works for different communities. This focuses on giving local communities ownership and agency to manage their own lives, environments and future. In the Pacific, this is illustrated in this video which flags how different communities and

cultures need local input to affect change. This is about communities helping themselves in a wide range of social and cultural roles, from health, environment and agriculture, to human rights.



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Most scholars agree that social capital links people in one of two primary ways. First, through **bonding** or linking people together *within* a group based on a common identity, such as family, close friends or people who share a culture or ethnicity. Second, through **bridging**, by linking people *across* different identity groups, such as those in different religions, classes or from different cultural or identity groups.

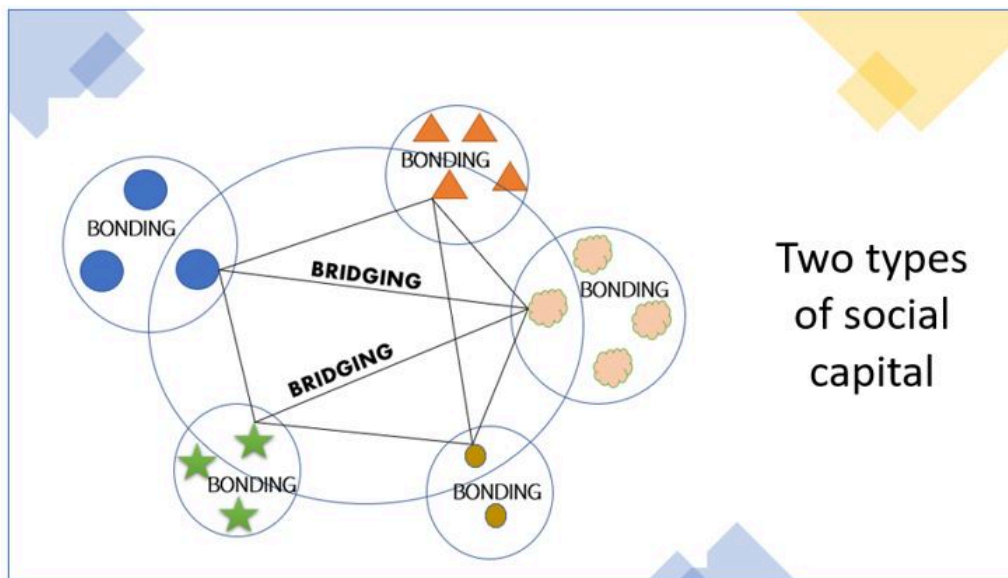


Figure 1: The two types of social capital: Bonding and bridging

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (pronounced bored you) argues that “social capital is never completely independent of other forms of capital” (1986, p. 251). He speaks of the power imbalance which lies at the core of social, cultural and human capital — and how individuals are disadvantaged in the capital exchange when access to resources is limited. This means that poorer or disadvantaged individuals or groups can miss out on social capital building – these are often the minority groups or interests we have spoken about elsewhere in the book. And so, “what is needed to make change for the public benefit and in the public interest is the internal *capacity* and *agency* to enable social capital to develop and grow *plus* external supports to sustain it” (Johnston, 2016, p. 132).

These external supports can come from governments at all levels, NGOs or sometimes corporates which can assist the growth and development of social capital in communities. In turn, this can translate into community capacity building, which we look at shortly.

Which of the following words apply to 'bridging' social capital?



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Language as social capital

Language is an important part of social capital. Shared language is seen to be critical for social interaction which is essential for people to work together for collective action (Claridge, 2020). Claridge says speaking and understanding a mutual language is identified with social identity, trust, participation and belonging. At the same time, a lack of shared language can emphasise difference and division, be a barrier to participation and interaction, and impair reaching common goals (Claridge, 2020). “In a practical sense, a lack of shared language can make communication ineffective and make it difficult to reach mutual understandings” (Claridge, 2020).

In recent years there has been a resurgence in rebuilding and restoring lesser-known languages or those languages that have fallen into disuse. It is hoped that this will help restore social capital, identity and belonging in groups associated with these languages. One such project – [50 Words](#) – is comprised of 60 Australian Indigenous languages. It has been collated by researchers from the University of Melbourne working directly with Indigenous communities and language speakers from around Australia. The interactive map enables you to read and listen to 50 words and phrases in many languages. Some of these are exchanges, such as: wanyjika-n yanku? (where are you going?) and ngurna yanku ngurra-ngkurra (I’m going home). Try out some of the words and then click on them and hear them spoken for you. There are group activity questions following the diagram, below.

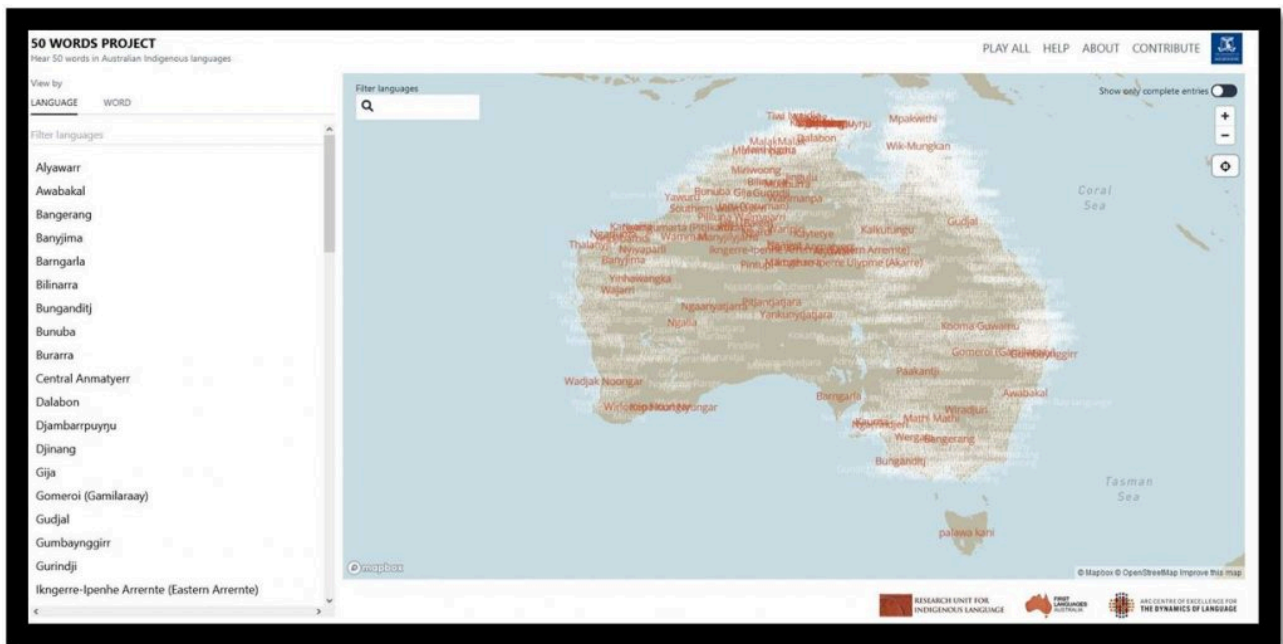


Figure 2: The 50 words website. Click on the image or visit www.50words.online

Contributor to 50 Words [Kado Muir](#) explained the importance of language:

‘When you lose a language, you lose a worldview. You lose a way of understanding the land on which you are living. You lose an understanding of different philosophies. It makes our lives as human beings a lot poorer if we lose a language.

If you learn a language, you then get access to that particular way of thinking that ties you back to country – back into the dreaming, the creation, and your ancestors. And once you start rewiring your brain in that way, it opens up a whole world of imaginings and possibilities’. (Johnston, 2020).

This sentiment is illustrated in the elements of social capital, as seen in the following diagram.

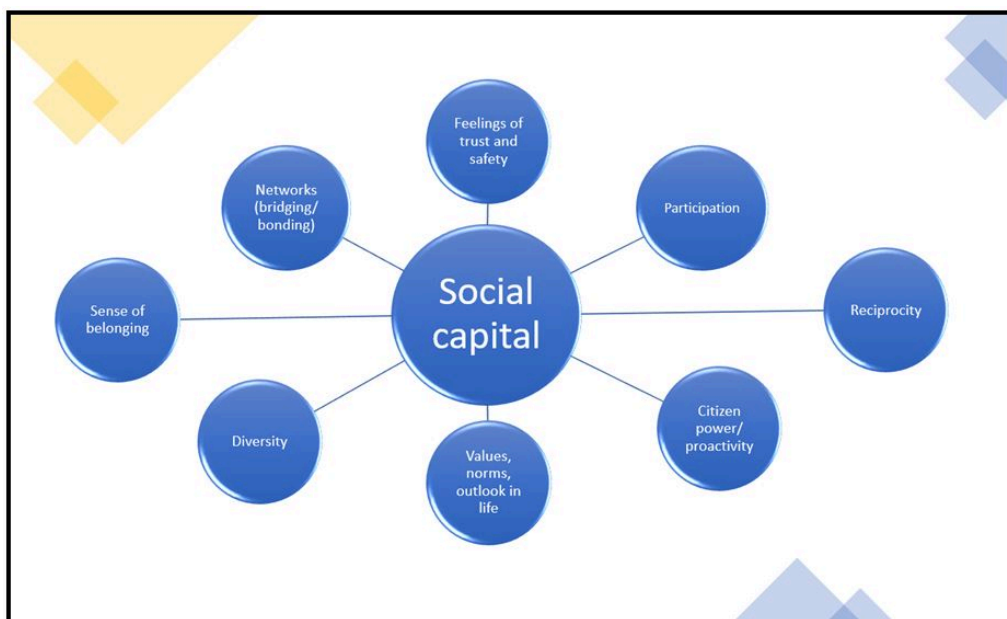


Figure 3: Eight components of social capital

Questions:

- Make a list of the eight outside elements in the social capital diagram and, using these elements, list how regenerating language through the 50 Word project might contribute to the social capital of Indigenous communities?
- What examples of bridging and bonding social capital can you identify? For example, which role did researchers from the University of Melbourne play? Which role did participants such as Kado Muir play?



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Community Capacity Building

Community capacity building puts social capital to work. It sees residents working together to achieve goals through communication, leadership, training, policy-making, technical or service assistance, and establishing networks for exchanging resources and ideas. Importantly, capacity building is a ‘bottom-up’ process, which means to be effective it must be driven from within the community, reflecting local circumstances and the needs of the community (Johnston, 2016). This is where partnerships come into play – often between a community and a local government, an NGO or a business (or a combination of these). These larger, usually better-resourced organisations can assist communities which identify their own local gaps, needs, strengths, opportunities, and priorities for development.

The Queensland Government has a [‘Capacity Building Toolkit’](#) to assist rural and regional Queenslanders develop and maintain sustainable, liveable and prosperous communities. It lists commonly accepted keys to success as:

- Having local people who are willing to ‘drive’ action.
- Developing ‘allies’ — people or organisations who can help.
- Using the existing assets of the community.
- Having a small visible success within six months.
- Having access to some resources.
- Celebrating successes.
- Establishing and maintaining good communication channels.

All of this includes looking *within* the community, at its collective social capital and the skill-sets of individuals, which may then be facilitated by an external partner. At the same time, a high level of community involvement can do the following:

- Raise community awareness about an issue or a project.

- Identify what will work and what will not.
- Verify ideas or information.
- Tap into new ideas and expertise.
- Provide avenues for dialogue.
- Build community support.
- Provide feedback or suggestions.

These elements were in force in a Victorian capacity building project in the 2000s when the regional town of Clunes sought government support to set up their very own ‘Booktown’. Read about their success story here (adapted from Johnston, 2016). You can check out the event [here](#).

Case study: Clunes community capacity building

Clunes is a small rural town in central Victoria, 139 kms from Melbourne. Though it was a booming gold-mining town in the nineteenth century, attracting miners and merchants from around the world, when the gold ran out the town went into decline with the population falling to less than 1,000 residents at the start this century. Migration away from the town to cities and larger centres, plus a devastating ten-year drought, impacted harshly.

The fate of Clunes changed in 2007 when a group of four residents met to promote the idea of a town-focused renewal strategy based on cultural development. They created the not-for-profit community organisation ‘Creative Clunes,’ which set its sights on developing the town around the European concept of second-hand and antiquarian bookshops. Clunes secured patronage from three levels of government – a success attributable to “the pool of social capital” in the town (Franks, 2015, p. 112). And, in 2016, the Victorian government announced continued funding for Clunes to the tune of \$240,000 (Victorian Government, 2016).

In 2012, Clunes achieved membership of the International Organisation of Booktowns, becoming the 15th international booktown in the world. This concept has been shown to “revitalise communities via multiplier effects from a book-based economy, cultural tourism and increased social capital for communities,” (Franks, 2015, p. 7). The Clunes annual book town weekend festival attracts in excess of 18,000 visitors, with over 60 book-traders involved (Brady, 2012). “In every sense ... Clunes becoming a booktown has been a community-building activity where all the players have socially benefited’ (Brady, 2012, p. 14).

Creative Clunes: 15th international booktown



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<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=51#h5p-29>

Questions:

- Go to the bullet points from the ‘toolkit’ above and consider how Clunes illustrates community capacity building at work?
- Why do you think governments back regional enterprises like this one and why might they view this as in the public interest?
- Can you explain how social capital can translate into capacity building in a regional township?

Another town that has become well known for its capacity building around community-government partnerships is Portland in the United States. Consider the capacity building it has achieved by doing some internet research. A starting point is here at this city of Portland site <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/civic/28381>.



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=51#h5p-13>

10.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Social enterprises find a sweet spot between being a business and a nonprofit. These are organisations like Thank you, Who Gives a Crap, OzHarvest, Betterbooks and many, many more which use different models to work to benefit the world through share-profits, fairtrade, assisting developing communities, recycling and repurposing, and so on. Their purpose, or mission, is always to help society or the environment in some way through related business activity. There are many definitions for social enterprise, but we really like this one from the online magazine [The Good Trade](#): “A social enterprise is a cause-driven business whose primary reason for being is to improve social objectives and serve the common good.”

No surprise that many definitions and descriptions touch on social enterprise as serving common good or public benefit. We don’t have to look too far then, to find the link with public interest communication. Not only are these enterprises driven by a social mission – such as healthcare, safe drinking water, sanitation, renewable energy, job creation and access to education – their reliance on public support means they need to effectively communicate their initiatives to make these happen. One example of a not-for-profit organisation that seeks to achieve positive social outcomes is ‘Share the Dignity’: a women’s charity which works to benefit those in crisis experiencing period poverty. Listen to the following podcast to find out more about what this organisation does and seeks to achieve.

Podcast: Claire Chuyue Chen Share the Dignity



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In this podcast Claire explains how the widespread experience of homelessness in Australia can result in ‘period poverty’, where women and girls do not have access to period products. ‘Share the Dignity’ organisation forms partnerships with stores to obtain donations of sanitary products, as well as individual donations of products and funds. This makes a meaningful

difference to the lives of many Australian girls and women, thousands of whom experience homelessness at any one time.

Of course, Australia is not the only country where this can happen. Other organisations such as 'Sanitary Aid Initiative' in Nigeria also work to raise awareness of this issue and support communities to overcome period poverty. Watch the following video to find out more about how organisations are engaging in public interest communication to alleviate this issue in Nigeria.



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Blended value proposition

Social enterprise pioneer Kim Alter says the rise of social enterprise, along with corporate social responsibility, social investing, and sustainable development illustrates the blend of financial, social, and environmental value. She calls this “the blended value proposition” (2007, p. 14). She says social enterprise sees a shift from thinking about *nonprofits* being solely responsible for social and environmental value and *for-profits* for economic value, to an understanding that both types of organisations can generate all three value sets. She clarifies what constitutes a social enterprise:

‘Though subtle, and subject to debate, the defining characteristic is that an income generating activity becomes a social enterprise when it is operated as a business. The following characteristics apply: the activity was established strategically to create social and/or economic value for the organization. It has a long-term vision and is managed as a going concern. Growth and revenue targets are set for the activity in a business or operational plan. Qualified staff with business or industry experience manage the activity or provide oversight, as opposed to nonprofit program staff’. (Alter, 2007, p. 17).

Earned Income Activity versus Social Enterprise

The following examples of Washington DC’s ‘Zoo Doo’ and Thai zookeeper’s innovative use of elephant dung further clarify the difference between a social enterprise and other forms of business (Case study from Alter, 2007, p. 17-18).

‘Zoo Doo’ case study

The National Zoo in Washington DC sells Elephant dung to the public as exotic fertilizer. Although the humorous product is popular among local organic gardeners, the 'Zoo Doo' venture is not treated as a business and the income it earns is insignificant. Opportunities to scale Zoo Doo into a viable enterprise by selling the product in nurseries and gardening catalogues, as well as adding other 'zoo products' to the line have not been realized. Instead Zoo Doo functions as an innovative public relations and marketing strategy used to attract visitors and patrons to the National Zoo. The small amount of money it generates is considered a plus.

Using the same raw material, Zookeepers in Bangkok, Thailand turned their Elephant dung into lucrative business. The Thais transform the animal excrement into high-quality handmade paper which are sold in stationary stores, nature shops, and used in premium paper products in domestic and export markets. The enterprise employs several people who process the organic pulp to produce handmade paper. To keep up with demand, Thai zookeepers source dung from other zoos and elephant habitats. Unlike Zoo Doo, the Elephant dung products are not advertised to consumers as such; rather, socially conscious consumers are sold on organic nature of the product and the fact that proceeds from sales are used to fund zoo activities and animal protection organizations.

Alter's social enterprise organisation [Virtue Ventures](#) provides some excellent examples of how social entrepreneurs work on social enterprises all over the world. (Tip: when you're researching social enterprise also look up social entrepreneurship as the two are often used interchangeably.) You'll find when you begin looking into social enterprises that there are intersections with other key themes covered in this book: publics and stakeholders, partnerships, social capital and capacity building. Social enterprises thus provide business contexts for how these themes may be operationalised or put into practice in a business sense.

Go to Virtue Ventures website page called 'Onsight' by clicking [here](#) and answer the following questions:

1. How does this model use communication to assist social enterprise ventures?
2. What features are useful about the 360degree and VR technology provided on this platform that we could associate with public interest communication?

Social enterprise models

The focus on assisting minority groups and those who may be poorly resourced, plus finding solutions to problems, makes social enterprise a neat fit with public interest thinking. Oxford University scholar Tanja Collavo says solutions to social and environmental problems can occur through innovation, the creation of employment opportunities, the development of skills in marginalised or disadvantaged communities, and the creation of business that generates social impact (Collavo, 2017).

These different approaches have been categorised in the following three models (Cadwell, 2017):

1. *The innovation model* – e.g. companies that develop clean energy technology to rural African communities, such as [Solar Sister](#)
2. *The employment model* – e.g. companies that employ artisans via fairtrade initiatives, such as [Faire](#)

[Collection](#)

3. *The give-back model* – e.g. companies that give a share of profits to a cause or community for purchases made, such as [Betterworldbooks](#)

Some social enterprises have characteristics of two or three of these. The Thai elephant example, above, certainly combines the first two. Read through the next example which has elements of all three.

Big Issue

You might have bought a copy of the Big Issue from a street vendor. This social enterprise is rich in innovation, creates jobs through micro-businesses, plus puts back the funds it makes into the community. First and foremost, the [Big Issue](#) runs social enterprises which create work opportunities for people who are unable to access mainstream work. These people come from many different circumstances: they may be homeless, long-term unemployed, intellectually or and physically disabled, have a mental illness, drug and alcohol dependency, or be a victim of family breakdown.

Big Issue Australia enterprises include:

- *The Big Issue* magazine – Created by an editorial team, this fortnightly quality magazine is made available for vendors to buy at \$4.50 per magazine. Vendors then sell the magazine to customers for \$9 each.
- The Women's Workforce – The Women's Subscription Enterprise employs marginalised and disadvantaged women to pack and sell subscription copies of *The Big Issue* magazine.
- The Big Issue Classroom – Provides workshops for school, tertiary and corporate groups providing real-life insights into homelessness and disadvantage.
- The Community Street Soccer Program – Links coaches and communities to run two-hour street soccer games.

In addition, the '[Homes for Homes](#)' initiative, is a sustainable and collaborative way of raising funds for social and affordable housing through donations from property sales (See the 'About us' page at <https://thebigissue.org.au/about-us/>).

The Big Issue operates all over the world. It [began in the UK](#) in 1991 – now 30 years later it is one of the oldest and biggest social enterprises in that country.

Test yourself on the following examples to see whether you can identify which of the social enterprise models are represented in the flash cards.



The Big Issue for sale in Japan. By Nesnad, Wikimedia Commons



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=49#h5p-34>

Social enterprises as a four-part strategy

Social enterprise is a practical way of making social change happen through business activity. A nifty way

of thinking about social enterprises that have been successful, including those we've considered in this chapter, is by considering four key social enterprise elements:

1. making money,
2. making a difference,
3. making the magic,
4. making it work.

This 'putting the puzzle pieces together' approach developed by the Australian [Business Planning guide for social enterprises](#) is intended to remind those interested in starting a social enterprise that the twin business and social aims call for the alignment of many things: a strategic plan; managing operations, finance, compliance and people; and having effective and efficient internal and external communication.

Theoretical intersections

We can further strengthen our understanding of social enterprise by considering some related theories.

Corporate social responsibility

CSR's triple bottom line – people, profit, planet – reminds us of the different aims in combining business with social and environmental needs and expectations. While most corporates are not social enterprises, being socially responsible has become a focus for working beyond what was once known as 'the bottom line' – which simply meant making a profit. There are many definitions for the complex notion of CSR. Some common features include:

- the balance between financial, social and environmental responsibilities,
- the voluntary nature of CSR (although there are increasing regulations and expectations forcing companies to act),
- the involvement of diverse stakeholders. (Johnston & Glenny, 2021).

The following diagram, adapted from Alter's 'hybrid spectrum', shows a spectrum of business activity and CSR's relationship to social enterprise.

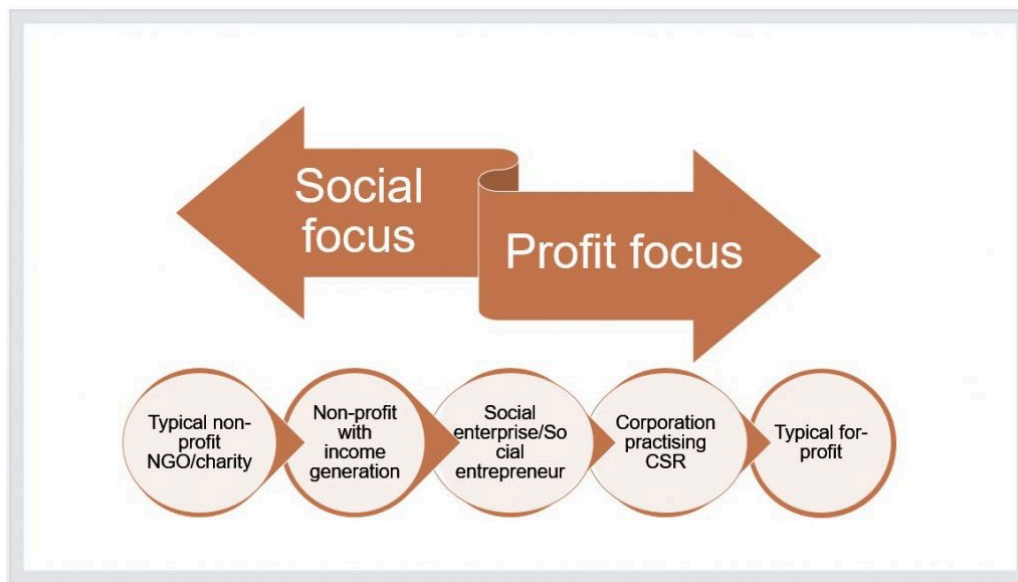


Figure 1: The spectrum of social and profit focused social enterprises

Enlightened self interest

This is a theory about how democracy works, but also has some strong messages for the hybrid business model of social enterprise. It is about finding a balance between individualism (self-interest) and common good (public interest). “The idea behind this theory is that the wider public interest and individual interests are not mutually exclusive—they can overlap,” (Johnston & Glenny, 2021, p. 284). Underpinning this concept is that as part of society an individual will contribute to wider social developments and take part in **the social contract**. The idea of the social contract has been popular for centuries, promoted by various philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau as an explanation of why individuals accept some obligations in exchange for social benefits. This theory is often associated with the idea of ‘doing well by doing good’, as explained here in a [Harvard Business Review](#) interview. The interview also links this concept to CSR.

Of course, times of major upheaval – such as a global pandemic – can lead to widespread suffering which can undermine the social contract. Indeed, some people have argued that the pandemic has shown a need to ‘reform the social contract’ after COVID-19, particularly given fears of [increasing authoritarianism around the world](#). Take a look at the following short video filmed at the [World Economic Forum](#). What do you think? Do we need to reform the social contract post-pandemic? If so, how should we do it?



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=49#oembed-2>



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=49#h5p-14>

CONCLUSION

The concept of the public interest has been incorporated into or examined by many, many disciplines and fields – from accountancy to anthropology, journalism to psychology (Johnston, 2017). Public interest is integrated into law, governance, and public policy across democratic systems of government on a global scale. Central to how it is understood and applied, is how it is communicated. This book has brought together a series of theories, concepts and practices that are pieced together to explain and illustrate this – that is, *Public Interest Communication in theory and action*.

Public Interest Communication: a thumbnail of the book

In building Public Interest Theory in **Part 1** we introduced the concept of ‘the public interest’, exploring how scholars have debunked any idea that there is one, single, over-abiding public interest; rather, how many interests compete within the value systems and lived existences of the many individuals and publics that make up society. Fragmented and heterogeneous, publics are often brought together by a particular issue – these publics are diverse and changeable reflecting the dynamic nature of society.

Their interests are usually made public – or communicated publicly – in public exchange sites called ‘discourse’ or ‘public arenas’. These arenas, which are acted out live in, for example, protests and meetings, or mediated via social media and television, provide forums or so-called “public interest battlegrounds” (Heath & Waymer, 2018, p. 40), enabling discussion and debate to occur. In the very best of public interest communication, these assume that dialogue, and with that, actively listening to others, take place. In reality, not everyone can access these forums for debate and not all interests will be heard or made public. The democratic ideal, however, is assumed for public interest communication to occur. Our final podcast on Veronica Koman — in the text box on the right — demonstrates what can happen when arenas for public interest debate are curtailed.

Podcast. Veronica Koman: The Saviour Angel of the Papuan People



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=839#audio-839-1>

What happens when people speak out about issues in places where public interest communication can be challenging? In this podcast Lorita Vina tells the story of [Veronica Koman](#), an Indonesian human rights activist and lawyer who has spoken up on human rights issues in Papua and West Papua provinces. Her efforts have both achieved accolades and threats: from winning the Sir Ronald Wilson Human Rights Award in 2019 to receiving online threats and disinformation campaigns.

Key to this theoretical underpinning which includes publics, dialogue, listening, and spaces in which this can occur, is reflexive practice or having the capacity and will to challenge existing thinking and work within an ethical framework. It is therefore important to understand how public interests and professional codes of ethics intersect. In this book, however, we focus more on individual behaviours than those of the professions, highlighting so-called virtue-ethics, which calls for developing ‘good’ communication habits which are put into practice everyday.

Part 2 turns to public interest communication in action, identifying contexts where ‘interest-forming practices’ (Johnston & Pieczka, 2018) occur and ways in which these practices are acted out at local, national and international levels. These five chapters bring their own theories to the book and to scholarship more broadly, but they are also used here to illustrate what public policy scholar Barry Bozeman calls ‘public interest in action’ (2007) and we call ‘public interest communication in action’. The first of these sites of action are ‘wicked problems’ – problems that are the most complex and difficult to solve and, indeed, cannot be fully (re)solved. Here, we identify the United Nations 17 Sustainability Goals – ranging from poverty and hunger to climate action and peace – these are among the most wicked of the world’s problems in our time. Social movements see some wicked problems, over time, find positive social and political change brought about through advocacy, activism and protest. For example, social movements against racism, slavery, discrimination, which see fairer societies result.

Public interest communication is also seen in action through partnerships and alliances which form to enable the sharing of resources, mutual support, achieving certain outcomes. These take the form of different groups, individuals or organisations working together through, for example, sponsorships between a corporate and a sporting group or individual. When groups of like-minded people are brought together, we see publics emerge and become active. This is also the ground in which social capital and capacity building emerges, where governments, corporates, and civil society work collaboratively to achieve outcomes for communities, driven by the needs of communities. Finally, the book explores that hybrid model of the social enterprise which combines causes with business thinking to help society and the environment. Inherent in these enterprises is a ‘giving back’ approach, explained in two popular theories of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and enlightened self interest.

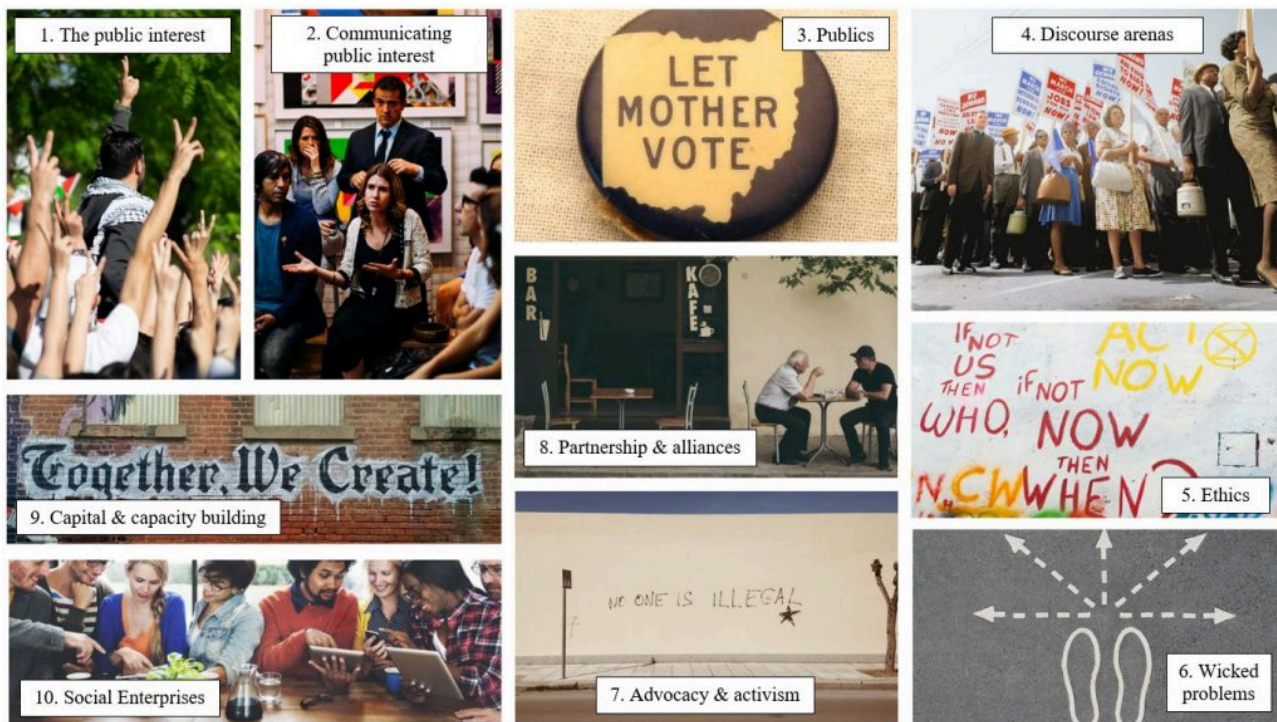


Figure 1: The chapters and topics considered in this book

There are other ways we might understand public interest in theory or action, such as through philanthropy, pro bono service, or volunteerism, which take the idea of public interest communication into other spaces. The idea of this book is open up the possibilities of how communication in the public interest can take many forms. Central to it are the six pillars we outlined at the start of the book: publicness, accessibility, substantive anchoring, rationality, inter-subjectivity and connectedness which combine to provide the building blocks for public-interest forming practices (Johnston & Pieczka, 2018). These do not come easily. As Communication scholar John Durham Peters points out, communication can be “a risky adventure” (1999, p. 267) without any guarantees; a “political problem of access and opportunity” (p. 56).

Using communication to work through difference

As we wrap up the book, we return to Dewey’s insightful comment from chapter 1:

‘Of course, there are conflicting interests; otherwise, there would be no social problems.’ (Dewey, 1991, p. 81).

Provocative and confronting, this challenging statement reminds us that society is complex and cannot be ‘managed’ in any simple way. His remarks, written almost a century ago (written in 1935 but published in 1991), called for “organized effort” to try to resolve issues and problems in what he called “the confusion, uncertainty and conflict that mark the modern world” (p. 92). His ‘modern world’ – at that time between the Great Depression and World War Two – was at a different time to ours, but our challenges are no

less daunting. As humankind navigates global challenges and crises – the coronavirus pandemic, global warming, and geopolitical tensions – Dewey’s description of threats to our world continue to resonate.

Yet, as huge as these issues were for him, and are now for us, he had confidence in humankind. Central to this was human’s capacity to communicate in effective and productive ways, with different publics, actively listening to what others are saying even when they disagree, and to inquire, find evidence and discovery in seeking to manage and resolve public interest clashes.

Let’s look at an example from within the context of COVID-19. One issue which emerged during the pandemic has been the division between those who are vaccinated and those who are not. As this podcast explains, a problem is that the so-called ‘anti-vaxxers’ are being marginalised and demonised by far more dominant narratives from governments and health professionals. The clear distinction between those who ‘are’ and those who ‘are not’ is simple for those who are not faced with the opposing point of view. However, for families, friends and colleagues who do not share the perspectives of those around them, this has been a divisive time. Listen to the podcast from the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation \(ABC\)](#) on ‘[How do I talk to people who don’t want to be vaccinated?](#)’ to hear a moderate approach to this problem. It provides some tips and workable solutions for dealing with what has emerged as a ‘wicked problem’.

In looking towards the future, this short video of young people speaking at the [Davos World Economic Forum](#) shows how public interest communication is taking place in the **public sphere**, what motivates people to engage in it and how it can take many forms. From disability rights, to climate change action, to increased equality, communication about the public interest is taking place every day, led by individuals stepping up to join public debate and advocate for their cause.



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Public interest communication for humanity

Following Dewey’s earlier statement, he went on: “The problem under discussion is precisely how conflicting claims are to be settled in the interest of the widest possible contribution to the interests of all – or at least of the great majority” (1991, p. 81). Remember again the timing – he was deeply committed to working together for the future of democracy. Other scholars since then (see Habermas, 1986, 1996; Fraser, 1990; Sorauf, 1957) have taken these ideas and advocated for democracies by focussing on those who are not part of the majority – these are minority publics, under-represented or marginalised people who also need to be considered in public interest thinking and decision-making. In this book we have endeavoured to shine a light on these individuals, groups and causes in order to truly understand what public interest communication is about. If we return to another concept from our first chapter, this takes courage – the challenge is therefore to be courageous individuals who use the power that communication brings to work for the best possible outcomes by putting this thinking into action.



<https://uq.pressbooks.pub/publicinterestcomm/?p=839#h5p-36>

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- Michele Clark, Assistant Professor, Bond University

ENDORSEMENTS

“Students will find Johnston and Gullivers’ book an excellent introduction to the theoretical debates around the concept of the ‘public interest’, an idea which is of central importance in ethics, democratic government, the law, and the notion of a ‘free press’. In the second half of the book explorations of public interest communication in action encourage the reader to concretize these debates in relation to complex contemporary concerns including: environmental activism, human rights advocacy, sustainability, building social capital, interest group coalitions and gender based violence. This book encourages students of communication to adopt an international focus and think critically about the communication challenges across a wide range of socio-political contexts.”

Professor Ian Somerville, University of Leicester

“What an amazing resource for students. The mixture of accessible and informative text, case studies, interactive activities, and more make this such an engaging read.”

Professor Kelly Fielding, University of Queensland

“This book is an excellent resource for students, practitioners, and community organisations among others, which provides a comprehensive overview and deeper insights situating public interest communication in society. It connects theory with practice so smoothly it is sure to provide clarity for students/readers gaining a first impression or investigating at greater depth. It’s dynamic, multimedia nature with hyperlinks opening a wealth of definitions, future reading, viewing, listening, and exploring opportunities through academic literature, case studies, interviews, videos, podcasts, and more. It is written in accessible and simple terms, but this does not at all indicate simplistic. Rather, complex issues are addressed in such an accessible way I can see it being a valuable resource for many, across sectors and interests beyond those working in communication and the third sector.”

Assistant Professor Michele Clark, Bond University

“This book shines a spotlight on the strategic value and purpose of communication by showing its centrality to finding solutions. While addressing action as well as theory, it goes beyond the usual tactical-level discussion to focus on the context in which communication contributes to society. Recognising that public interest communication is often aspirational, the book nevertheless inspires the reader with many real-life examples of the power of communication in addressing social dynamics and contested situations.”

Dr Leanne Glenny, University of South Australia

“This is a fabulous introduction to key concepts in public interest communication. It untangles the notion of ‘publics’ and shows how theories of the public interest, the public sphere, and discourse arenas, among others, intersect with communication practice. A range of examples and case studies demonstrate how communication can respond to public interests through media and social action. The digital, multimedia format is easy to navigate. Pop-up definitions and links to additional material are a useful resource and embedded audio and video bring life to key themes. This is an ideal text for students of public relations and strategic communication and anyone wanting an introduction to the topic.”

Dr Skye Doherty, University of Queensland

‘The updated concepts and theories in the new Pressbook as the pinnacle of resource and information and interest for this course was so incredible.’

Student, COMU3015: Public Interest Communication course 2021, University of Queensland

‘I really liked the Pressbook, I think this gave really clear and interesting insights into each topic.’

Student, COMU3015: Public Interest Communication course 2021, University of Queensland

GLOSSARY

Adaptive change

Changes made to address more nebulous challenges or issues by experimenting with new approaches and practices.

Advocacy

‘The act of persuading or arguing in support of a specific cause, policy, idea or set of values’ (Cox and Pezzullo 2016). Advocacy can be undertaken by groups or individuals (Tarrow, 2011), who together form a movement on the basis of a shared identity (Diani, 1992).

Agency

The capacity to act independently, to make free choices and to act on one's will.

Binary

Binary thinking refers to seeing things as opposites, black-and-white, right-and-wrong, with no middle ground, thus ignoring the nuances, contexts and complexities that exist within any given situation.

Campaigns

‘A connected series of operations designed to bring about a particular result’ (Merriam Webster Dictionary).

Civil society

Groups and individuals, which are independent and distinct from government and business sometimes also referred to a 'the third sector'.

Community capacity building

Building the ability of communities to develop, implement and sustain their own solutions to problems, in a way that allows them to shape and exercise control in a positive manner.

Consequentialism

The doctrine that the morality of an action is to be judged solely by its consequences.

Corporate citizenship

Where a corporate entity, such as corporation, business, or business-like organisation, has social, cultural and environmental responsibilities to the community.

Deliberative action

Bringing together members of the public to get input and meaningful insights into how people think about a topic.

Deliberative democracy

A form of democracy in which deliberation is central to decision-making and where people are placed closer to the affairs of government and decision-makers

Deliberative reasoning

Reasoning which takes into account considerations such as values and beliefs and opinions to arrive at a preferred course of action.

Deontology

The study of the nature of duty and obligation.

Dialectic

A complex concept which is essentially about one idea or thesis being considered against an opposing idea or anti-thesis, ideally to reach a synthesis.

Discourse arenas

A site or environment in which debate and discussion takes place.

Heterogeneous

An entity consisting of diverse parts or things that can be very different from each other.

Outcomes

‘The clearly defined, decisive and achievable changes in social actors, i.e. individuals, groups, organizations or institutions that will contribute to the overall campaign goal(s)’ (UN Women 2012).

Pluralist societies

Are those where a diverse group of individuals (for example of diverse ethnicities, sexual orientations, cultures, religions and traditions) coexist, maintain their identities and share power.

Post-truth

Relates to the accepting of information, facts or arguments on face value or without clear authority, without checking on the veracity or 'truth' of the communication which may be fake or a lie.

Pragmatic solutions

Solutions based on real world conditions or circumstances, informed by what can realistically be done as opposed to idealistic or theoretical courses of action.

Problematization

To view something as a problem requiring a solution to allow new viewpoints, approaches and action to emerge

Public arenas

A public site or environment in which discussion and debate takes place.

Public interest groups

Any group of individuals or organisations which promote and/or attempt to influence issues of public concern.

Public sphere

An environment in which individuals discuss, deliberate, exchange opinions and form public opinion.

Reflexive practice

When individuals reflect on what they have learned and then consider how the implications of their learnings can impact the broader context.

SMART

An acronym meaning 'Specific', 'Measurable', 'Action-based', 'Realistic', 'Time-bound'.

Social movements

An entity with three characteristics. First, that individuals share a collective identity; second, that they interact in a loose network of organizations with varying degrees of formality; and third, that they are engaged voluntarily in collective action motivated by shared concern about an issue (Giugni and Grasso, 2015).

Social responsibility

The idea that businesses should act in a way that benefits society or has the best interests of their environment and society as a whole.

Tactics

Tactics are the actions used to implement a strategy, which itself is a 'plan that is intended to achieve a particular purpose' (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries).

The public sphere

The public sphere is the arena where citizens can deliberate, discuss, exchange public opinions and come together to form public opinion.

The social contract

An implicit, hypothetical, or actual agreement or compact among members of a society to cooperate for social benefits, or between rulers and the ruled, defining the rights and duties of each.

United Nations Global Compact

A voluntary initiative based on CEO commitments to implement universal sustainability principles and to take steps to support UN goals. See more at <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/about>

Utilitarian

The philosophy which argues that an action is right if it results in the happiness of the greatest number of people in a society or a group.

Virtue ethics

A character-based approach to morality which argues that we acquire virtue through practice and character traits rather than fulfilling duties