



The social imperative in public relations: Utilities of social impact, social license and engagement

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ABSTRACT

Public relations is recognized as an organizational boundary-spanning function accountable for communication engagement with diverse stakeholders in ways that facilitate social relationships, co-creation, and communication. It is this perspective that underpins the claim that social license and social impact have utility for public relations theory, as organizational decisions have intended and unintended impacts on communities. This perspective also underscores the need for organizations to find better ways to understand and attend to public expectations in an authentic manner. The notion of an organization or industry having a social license to operate and needing to consider their social impact has never been more important. This special section in *Public Relations Review* on Engagement, Social License to Operate (SLO) and Social Impact responds to the call to articulate the utility of SLO and social impact by situating and conceptually strengthening these concepts within public relations scholarship and outlining future research for public relations theory building. This editorial conceptually situates SLO and social impact for public relations and engagement, and identifies future research opportunities. The papers in this special section are introduced, highlighting the links between the concepts and public relations.

1. Introduction

Organizations, whether they realize it or not, can have a significant social impact – positive or negative – on the communities in which they function, and on society more broadly. Anticipating social impact underscores the imperative for organizations - and public relations - to be responsive to societal expectations (Heath, 2018; Hurst, Johnston, & Lane, 2020; Johnston & Lane, 2018a, 2018b; Taylor, 2011). Societal expectations reflect individual, group, and community concerns, that work to conceptually parallel social license to operate. Yet these expectations and therefore social license/s, may not always align with what is technically lawful or politically endorsed (Bice, Brueckner, & Pforr, 2017; Wright & Bice, 2017). Current and historical cases describing misalignments between community expectation and organizational actions underscore the importance of engagement. These cases also acknowledge the need to consider, communicate, interact with, and respond to diverse perspectives that generally exist in a social environment in order to determine societal expectations and the potential (or actual) impact of the organization or industry.

The notion of an organization or industry having a social license to

operate (SLO) and needing to consider their social impact has never been more important (Hurst et al., 2020). This special edited issue in *Public Relations Review* focusing on engagement, SLO and social impact underpins the claim that SLO and social impact have utility for public relations theory. A concept has utility if it is judged as something that is valued, useful, advantageous and offers benefits. Broome (1991) notes the key principle of utility is “that actions are to be judged by their usefulness in this sense: their tendency to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness” (p. 1). Articulating the attributes and dimensions of SLO and social impact will foster the development and contributions of these socially oriented concepts within public relations and engagement scholarship.

Traditionally, SLO has been seen as an ephemeral concept (Mayes, 2015) largely associated with the mining and resources sector (Boutilier, 2020a, 2020b; Hurst et al., 2020). Social impact, on the other hand, has been associated with consequences from decisions or actions, typically discussed in contexts such as project and infrastructure management (Vanclay, 2020), higher education (Heath & Waymer, 2021), and banking (Bartlett, Tywoniak, & Hatcher, 2007). While these concepts have been recognized within the literature as important to public

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relations scholarship and practice (see, for example, Clark, 2000; Golob & Bartlett, 2007; Hall & Jeanneret, 2015; Johnston, Lane, Devin, & Beatson, 2018; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Latane, 1996), conceptually and theoretically they remained undeveloped in the public relations literature; in other words, their utility is untapped. This special section responds to the call to articulate the utility of engagement, SLO and social impact as distinct concepts yet with interrelated attributes, by situating and conceptually strengthening these within public relations scholarship and outlining future research for public relations theory building.

This editorial first outlines the social imperative for public relations and the empirical foundations of social impact and SLO as a guiding framework for public relations scholarship. Following this, key research opportunities are identified. The editorial concludes with an introduction to each of the papers in this special section.

2. Social impact

Social impact describes the consequence, real or perceived, on a social setting, that results from an organizational decision or action (Burdge & Vanclay, 1996; Johnston & Lane, 2018b). The impact may be considered positive or negative for a community, intended or unintended (in the sense that the organization planned/did not plan to have an impact), and may also be anticipated or unanticipated (in the sense that the impact, or the effects of the impact, could/could not be conceived or expected) (Esteves, Franks, & Vanclay, 2012; Sloatweg, Vanclay, & Van Schooten, 2001; Vanclay, 2003).

Latane (1981) describes these impacts as “any of the great variety of changes in physiological states and subjective feelings, motives and emotions, cognitions and beliefs, values and behavior, that occur in an individual, human, or animal, as a result of the real, implied or imagined presence or actions of other individuals” (p. 343). Johnston and Lane (2018b) define social impact as “changes—whether they be intended or unintended, anticipated or unanticipated, positive or negative—in the way people live, experience, sustain, and function within their society, resulting from organizational decisions and consequent behaviors” (p. 103). As the definitions suggest, organizational decisions and the resulting behaviors can have wide ranging impacts on stakeholders.

For a decision or action to be deemed a social impact, however, it must be experienced or felt, in the physical and/or perceptual or emotional sense, at either the individual or community level (Johnston et al., 2018, p. 171; see also, Mahmoudi, 2013; Sloatweg et al., 2001; Vanclay, 2002, 2003). The impact therefore results in a real or perceived change to an individual's way of life. Vanclay (2003) characterizes these changes quite broadly, for example, across culture, community, political systems, environment, health and well-being, or their personal and property rights (p. 8). Due to the arguably all-encompassing nature of social impacts, determining what is a social impact may be challenging for both the organization and the community/individual upon which the impacts are felt.

Public relations has traditionally been defined by its boundary spanning function and the responsibility to facilitate information, manage relationships, and meaning making (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992; White & Dozier, 1992). Aldrich and Herker (1977) argue one of the key functions of a boundary spanner relates to external representation and processing information in a way that connects the organization to its environment. Historically, public relations has privileged an organizational perspective when compared to actors (publics/stakeholders/community members) within the organization's social environment. In other words, the focus has been on identifying and prioritizing relationships and networks that directly sustain the organization's functions.

More contemporary approaches to public relations evidence a shift from the enlightened foundations of organizational self-interest to articulate the actual and potential contribution of public relations to social capital (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Sommerfeldt, 2013). More to this,

these contemporary approaches acknowledge community agency as a fully functioning society (Heath, 2018) and overall, public relations contribution to democracy “to generate social capital that connects individuals, groups and organizations, its value to activist groups, and the normative importance of dialogue” (Edwards, 2016, p. 61). This paradigm shift in public relations scholarship reflects an emphasis on the increasing importance of the social imperative as a research agenda, rather than a research agenda that is narrowly focused on organizational self-interest. Less focus, or indeed consideration, however, has generally been afforded to the wider social imperative – operationalized typically as ‘community’ or as the ‘outer rim’ of organizational stakeholders and publics. These are groups who may not be immediately visible, whose voices may not be so loud, who may not be so powerful – or in fact, have been rendered powerless by organizational actions (see, for example, Ciszek, 2020; Johnston & Lane, 2019). Arguably, these groups or stakeholders are just as important – and in some cases, the most important stakeholder – in conferring the social license of an organization or industry.

3. Social license to operate

Arthur Page, as one of public relations forebearers, reminded us that “all business in a democratic country begins with the public's permission and exists by public approval” (cited in Clark, 2000, p. 364). This approval is expressed as a social license to conduct the business, or in other words, to operate. Heath and Waymer (2009), Marsh (2021), and others (Heath, 2006; Heath et al., 2006; Lyons, Bartlett, & McDonald, 2016) contend that conceptually and theoretically, SLO has been central to public relations since its beginning.

While the permission and approval to operate has traditionally been assumed by businesses, increasingly public approval and subsequent SLO needs to be earned and maintained. SLO describes the general “ongoing acceptance of an entity (individual, project, organization and/or industry) by its stakeholders, as evidenced by the entity's ability to engage with its stakeholders and respond to the ever-changing demands on, and expectations of, the entity” (Hurst et al., 2020 p. 3). Demuijnck and Fasterling (2016) go further to conceptualize SLO as a form of contract and argue - as the basis for corporate legitimacy - SLO needs to gain “the consent of all persons concerned with it” (p. 675). SLO therefore requires organizational attentiveness to its social setting and opinion environment. It also requires ongoing SLO negotiation with communities, which, van der Meer and Jonkman (2021) argue, is often undertaken through a “discursive interplay among recognized groups” (p. 1). Public relations can facilitate this interplay.

What is missing from most definitions of SLO, is the explicit link to social impact. However, as Santiago, Demajorovic, Rossetto, and Luke (2021, p. 1) highlight:

With a central idea being that a community can give or withdraw support for a project, the social licence concept originated primarily from an industry perspective, where a business case was identified for properly considering social impacts and perspectives and managing ‘social risks’; thus, there is substantial research developed around the concept from this perspective.

As demonstrated through the work of Vanclay (2003, 2020), and expressed by Santiago et al. (2021, p. 11), central to SLO is “the need to predict and mitigate the potential social impact generated by the enterprise, and the intensity of impact being seen according to each social subgroup being affected differently and having differing interests”. In addition to the prediction, mitigation, and intensity of SLO, Santiago et al. argue risk perception also plays a role in SLO. Most of the literature on SLO biases, rather instrumentally, risk to the organization (Johnston & Taylor, 2018) rather than the community (Santiago et al., 2021). However, in recent years, critical studies on SLO have begun to emerge, which not only consider the ways in which social acceptance, and thus

SLO, can be manipulated, but also highlight how organizational practices may serve to simultaneously protect its reputation, while downplaying or hiding risks to the community (Santiago et al., 2021).

Parsons and Moffat (2014) highlight the importance of voice in SLO and its role, arguing the idea of SLO “enables communities to find their own voice and agency to influence the trajectories” (p. 24) of projects, organizations, or industries. Community engagement therefore becomes a central vehicle for understanding the nature of community expectations (including around potential or actual social impacts), facilitating interaction, voice, and communication (see Johnston & Lane, 2019). In turn, community engagement can build capability in the organization and community to achieve shared goals, reduce negative social impacts, and negotiate SLO.

Engagement is conceived as multilevel and relational, underpinned by cognitive, affective and behavioral features, such as “connection, interaction, participation, and involvement” (Johnston, 2018, p. 18). Engagement moves beyond communication when the focal topic is salient; each actor has a stake (that may be known or unknown) in the outcome; the communication process is dialogic, iterative, participation based and interactive; and the outcome is emergent based on communicative interaction (see Johnston & Taylor, 2018). For community and civic groups, engagement becomes meaningful when the outcome addresses a socially significant or important problem – in other words, has a social impact. From an ecological perspective (Everett, 1993), engagement can be used as a process to understand, monitor, and respond to the attributes of an entity’s SLO and its social impact within a community setting.

4. The value of the ecological perspective

An ecological perspective on public relations theory acknowledges a role for social responsibility in public relations theory as a mediating effect on organizational-environmental relationships (Everett, 1993). Further to this, an ecological perspective of public relations recognizes organization-environment relationships and interaction as situationally aligned (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985; Everett, 1993).

Public relations has traditionally taken an organizational and advocacy lens, however, this focus is increasingly challenged by scholars who have called for more public-centered perspectives of public relations. Public-centered perspectives recognize the influence of public relations as a social phenomenon (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007) and has seen the prioritization of concepts in public relations scholarship and practice such as social capital, civil society, relational capital, communication engagement, and fully functioning society (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2006, 2018; Johnston & Lane, 2018a, 2019; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Sommerfeldt, 2013; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Yang & Taylor, 2013, 2015).

Moving towards more public-centered perspectives of public relations firmly underscores the need for SLO – and relatedly the associated consideration of social impact – to become the implicit and explicit assumption upon which public relations operates. This would require organizations to move beyond an instrumental perspective that focuses on organizational risk and the management of stakeholders without the need for legitimate engagement. Instead, it would require organizations to truly acknowledge the genuine risk faced by communities and other stakeholders in relation to social impacts created by an entity. It also requires organizations to engage with communities and stakeholders proactively, early and legitimately, to navigate expectations around social impact and to obtain a SLO.

5. Advancing social impact and SLO as a research agenda for public relations

Given public relations is essentially a “field whose strategic raison d’être is shaped by stakeholders” (McKie & Willis, 2012, p. 850) and should, ideally, contribute to a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006),

we argued that this remit warranted further scholarship to explore the important nexus between communication engagement and the theoretical contributions of SLO and social impact to public relations. However, while it had been recognized that “communication of organization’s social impact is important” (Golob & Bartlett, 2007, p. 2), the contribution of public relations to social impact beyond simple communication, and to SLO, remained largely underdeveloped until recently.

Similarly, while public relations scholars (Avidar, 2017; Botan & Taylor, 2005; Dodd, Brummette, & Hazleton, 2015; Hung-Baesecke, Chen, & Boyd, 2016; Jelen-Sanchez, 2017; Johnston, 2014; Johnston & Lane, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Johnston & Taylor, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014) have established that engagement can assist organizations in many aspects of building, understanding, and negotiating stakeholder relationships, organizational impact, and potentially SLO, the conceptual and empirical links to social impact and SLO had, until recently, been under-theorized within the public relations literature. This situation drives this special section.

5.1. Special section papers

The ten papers in this special section responded to the call to elucidate the links between engagement, SLO and social impact, and to situate these important concepts within the public relations vernacular – and ideally, elucidate a more nuanced role for public relations in wider SLO and social impact scholarship, beyond that of serving organizational interests.

Marsh (2021) – whose paper is a useful starting point for the special issue – argues that the “concept of a social license to operate has been inherent in public relations since the discipline’s early beginnings in classical rhetoric” (p. 1). In this paper, Marsh offers “The Six R’s of Public Relations”, which shows “a (not the) model of public relations in which the necessity of social licenses to operate seems both inescapable and instructive” (p. 1). In summary, his paper offers a treatise on the interplay of SLO and public relations, exploring how such licenses can be interwoven within public relations processes beginning with research and reflection, then moving through reciprocity, reputation, and relationships toward resource acquisition. Optimistically – and in a nod to Heath’s (2006) seminal “Onward into more fog” essay – Marsh suggests that “studies of why and how to secure and maintain social licenses to operate have become important contributions to our efforts to make our way, accompanied by echoes and shadows, through fog that perhaps is lifting” (p. 6).

Capizzo’s (2020) study aimed “to deepen the understanding of corporate engagement in contentious issue discourse and extend SIM [social issues management] theory with SLO through an analysis of corporate engagement” (p. 2). In this empirical study, Capizzo draws on corporate public statement about same-sex marriage before and after the U.S Supreme Court’s Obergefell vs. Hodges decision, a landmark case that ruled couples of the same sex should not be denied the right and liberty to marry. Capizzo found that corporations use both episodic and relational community engagement in the legitimacy-building function of social issues management for SLO. This article establishes links between SLO, social issues management, and community engagement, but also “points to the challenges as well as the opportunities for organizations to use public relations as part of broader efforts to strengthen relationships with and deepen understanding of LGBTQ publics” (p. 2).

Heath and Waymer’s (2021) paper posits that universities, as social institutions, and have unique CSR engagement roles. The authors suggest that universities’ CSR engagement roles should include “(1) elevating the functional and moral standards which guide them, (2) engaging in internal and external public arenas to foster constructive social impact, and (3) fostering research, teaching, and community service as engagement that produces social change by raising standards of moral and functional impact” (p. 1). It is via these criteria that judgements can be made about whether the CSR and associated

legitimacy efforts of universities either reinforce hegemony or seek constructive social change. Importantly, this paper makes a contribution by drawing on strategic issues management literature to conceptualizes CSR and legitimacy “as pillars for assessing how and how well universities internal and external engagement leads to and even constitutes social impact” (p. 2).

Koya, Hurst, and Roper’s (2021) paper explores how “seemingly relational engagement strategies might be used to co-opt, manipulate or deliberately manufacture consent and cooperation in order to create a paradoxical SLO; one that simultaneously results in positive and negative outcomes for a community” (p. 2). Using an exemplar case, the authors illustrated how an organization was able to use relational and dialogic forms of engagement to generate positive outcomes for the community, social capital, and obtain a SLO. Paradoxically however, this helped members of the organization become elected as the local government, and thus gave the organization substantial power over the community. This paper contributes to the public relations by responding to Johnston and Taylor’s (2018) call to explore the unintended consequences of engagement. It also argues the evaluation of SLO, as well as normative or relational forms of engagement, should move beyond assessing positive outcomes for stakeholders or the community, to critically asking whether the organization contributes to a fully functioning society (Heath & Waymer, 2009)

In a similar vein to Capizzo (2020), Waymer and Logan’s (2021) paper is situated within the context of organizations taking a stand in relation to politically and socially controversial issues. Their paper, however, focuses on the notion of corporate social advocacy (CSA) and engagement, using Nike to empirically explore the connections between the two. Specially, the authors aimed to “uncover if or how Nike is engaging CSA that challenges status quo gender, racial, and cultural norms that attempt to circumscribe the human potential of women and people of color” (p.1). Waymer and Logan’s paper contributes by providing a deeper understanding of the connections between engagement and CSA in public relations theory and practice. Importantly, while the authors do not necessarily make explicit the link between CSA and social impact, arguably CSA is one of the ways in which organizations can have a social impact, hence warranting the paper’s inclusion in the special issue.

The article by Hurst, Johnston and Lane (2020) provides a useful summary of the SLO literature which may be particularly useful for those not familiar with the concept, and offers an expanded definition of the concept. Drawing on SLO and public relations literature, the paper posits two organizational approaches to building SLO – pro-self and pro-social – and outlines the role of public relations and engagement in achieving, maintaining, and repairing SLO. The authors advocate that organizations should ideally adopt the pro-social perspective which favors relational forms of engagement. This perspective acknowledges the importance of the boundary spanning role of public relations, and the view that public relations should be practiced in line with notions of social capital, fully functioning society (FFS) and the reflective paradigm. Importantly, this paper firmly situates SLO within the public relations literature, making “initial links to well-established concepts in the public relations domains, including reputation management, relationship management, stakeholder engagement, social capital, FFS [fully functioning society], and the reflective paradigm” (p. 7).

Ihlen and Raknes’ (2020) paper highlights the centrality of public interest to SLO, by arguing an organization’s SLO depends on how it acts according to social norms, engages with stakeholders, and meets public interest. Specifically, the authors set out to consider how public relations practitioners and lobbyists use appeals to public interest to “create” a SLO (p. 1), and conducted 58 qualitative interviews to empirically explore this notion. The findings showed how practitioners and lobbyists were able to “pick and tailor their arguments to what their target audience presumably would appreciate” and thus, drew on appeals to public interest they thought would help legitimize their practices. Ihlen and Raknes’ paper shows how appeals to public interest may be used to

establish (and arguably maintain) a SLO. Critically, the authors acknowledge that “many of the instances of public interest augmentation raise the question of whether or not use of this type of argument is part and parcel of the self-identity of the organization or “just” a strategic move” (p. 7). They suggest that organizational statements should not necessarily be “taken at face value” and instead, that evaluation of SLO should “hinge on whether or not important stakeholders believe an organization to be a legitimate social actor that is beneficial for society” (p. 7).

Saniei and Kent’s (2021) paper considers SLO within a novel context, that of crowdfunding campaigns. Specifically, they suggest SLO is reflected as the success of the funding achieved given by the members of communities of interest around crowdfunding campaigns. Drawing on content analysis of 68 successful and unsuccessful campaigns, Saniei and Kent found that successful campaign creators built communities via the use of weak ties, in which they distributed information about, and beyond, their projects to identify interested people and groups that built their communities. Their findings also suggested that campaign creators practice dialogic engagement to maintain their SLO over time. This paper operationalizations SLO as tangible funding – or in other words, suggests that funding is an indicator of SLO. The paper also acknowledges that crowdfunding has traditionally been “categorized as “investor relations” (Doan & McKie, 2017) and thus, is overlooked in the public relations literature” (Saniei & Kent, 2021, p.7). By framing crowdfunding as a co-creational community engagement practice, the paper also extends the scope of public relations to this context.

In acknowledging that “[s]ocieties are increasingly characterized by polarization and fragmentation on a variety of socio-political issues” and that “corporations have become inherently intertwined with their mediated and polarized socio-political surroundings” van der Meer and Jonkman’s (2021, p. 1) paper sought to conceptualize corporate engagement within this context. They argued that due to the increasing polarization of publics, fluctuating perspectives on social issues, and the premise that organization are now required to “actively speak out and engage in often-contested, political issues” (p. 8), the way in which an organization maintains its SLO has changed. In fact, they suggest that the “politicization of corporations forces them to become more engaged with their socio-political environment in an effort to maintain their SLO” (p. 8). Drawing on the notions of issues arenas and corporate political advocacy, the authors argue that corporations pressured to take a stance on social issues can be guided by their intrinsic values and moral standpoints, rather than efforts to balance competing interests of multiple stakeholders to negotiate SLO.

Finally, Mak, Chaidaroon, Poroli, and Pang’s (2021) study investigated the “manifestations of socio-cultural meanings in sustainability-oriented discourses” to consider how organizations “make sense of their presence as society-committed actors” (p. 1). Focusing on organizations in Hong Kong, the authors took a novel approach by “viewing corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability discourses as the discursive sites that inform the organizations’ sense-making of their SLO” (p. 1). Through adopting a constitutive view of communication (CCO), and utilising cultural discourse analysis (CuDA), the authors were able to demonstrate how companies demonstrate their discursive practices in constructing engagement and aspirational talk.

Overall, the papers in the special section contribute to shaping the form and scope of a social imperative for future research in public relations. While some of the papers make more explicit links to SLO and social impact than others, collectively, they offer a range of theories and perspectives, including fully-functioning society, the reflective paradigm, social issues management, corporate social advocacy, strategic issues management, issues arenas, and corporate political advocacy, to forge initial links between engagement and public relations, and SLO and social impact. Both the social license and social impact literature offer rich bodies of scholarship which have the utility to further public relations theory and practice. Likewise, public relations’ understanding of engagement, and related concepts, including the theories and

perspectives noted above, offer utility to research on SLO and social impact, to contribute deep insights into the conceptualization and practice of these concepts.

6. A roadmap for future research

The special edited section in *Public Relations Review* on engagement, SLO, and social impact brings focus to a number of key research opportunities for public relations that extend and enrich SLO, social impact and engagement within existing research topics, including in the areas of trust, reputation, framing and agenda setting, issues management and activism, and cultural/internal communication.

The first opportunity is to understand the role of trust in the formation of SLO and social impact. While trust is acknowledged as important in SLO (Jartti, Litmanen, Lacey, & Moffat, 2020) and social impact assessment in relation to social capital and social networks (Vanclay, 2003), the understanding of trust is intellectually and methodologically limited, is poorly conceptualized, and is not used to address complex or societal problems (Valentini, 2020). Future research can also measure trust within a SLO process and to consider how trust influences the perceived social impacts from organizational decisions.

A positive organizational reputation is often viewed as an outcome of having an SLO (Dare, Schirmer, & Vanclay, 2014; Gunningham, Kagan, & Thornton, 2004; Prno & Slocombe, 2012). However, as Marsh (2021, p. 4) pointed out, evolutionary biology tends to view reputation “more as a construct built by reciprocity and leading to relationships” (emphasis added). To date however, there has been limited exploration of how a company’s reputation might impact – either positively or negatively – on its ability to obtain and maintain a SLO. In addition, while a positive social impact would likely have a positive impact on an organization’s reputation (or alternatively, negative), limited attention has been given to exploring how an organization’s reputation and its dimensions mediate or moderate a perceived social impact and if this changes over time within an ecological system approach.

Recent work by Boutilier (2020a, 2020b) has emphasized the link between SLO and framing in terms of how it is perceived by different actors, and provided a new ‘narratives and network’ model of SLO that responds to a gap in the literature by considering the “process-oriented exploration of how public opinion” affects SLO (p. 1). Specifically, the ‘narrative and networks’ model seeks to integrate “community impacts based in stakeholder relationships with public opinion impacts based in resource policy narratives in the public sphere” (Boutilier, 2020b, p. 1). SLO literature has also acknowledged the need for organizations (or industries) to obtain three, interrelated licenses: a social license, legal/actuarial license, and a political license (see for example, Bice et al., 2017; Boutilier, 2020b; Morrison, 2014). Studies using agenda setting may yield important insights from the interplay of these licenses. For example, consideration could be given as to how media agenda, political agenda and public opinion may impact these licenses and how the ‘agenda’ of one license might impact on another. In a similar vein, the opportunity also exists to consider how agenda setting and shifts in public opinion can lead to shifting societal expectations of what is – or is not – an acceptable social impact.

Future research is also needed to understand how issue narratives are framed to threaten or challenge an entity’s SLO, as well as reveal unintended negative social impacts. Similarly, future research opportunities focused on crisis, specifically addressing how to adequately respond in the face of challenges to SLO, and claims of a negative impact, can offer greater understanding on how organizations and communities can navigate through challenges that serve both community and organizational interests.

Activism, and the role of activists to influence the financial implications around SLO offers great opportunities for further research, as Parsons and Moffat (2014, p. 274) highlight:

The significance of a social licence may therefore derive from the capacity of stakeholders to impose costs on companies or to influence the conditions of finance, for example. This may occur through protests or blockades, by organizing product boycotts, through media campaigns, by lobbying governments or by legally challenging activities.

Cases where the SLO of an entity has been challenged through secondary boycotts and/or shareholder activism may seek to understand what aspects are more likely to challenge the acceptance or approval of an organization’s decision. These cases may yield insights for communities and other stakeholders to help them find their agency and better challenge the SLO of an organization and/or advocate for improved social impacts.

Finally, the ways in which SLO and social impact are justified and internally communicated as part of organizational decision making raises important implications for internal communication, and more specifically, organisational values and culture. Culture is conceived as shared knowledge over time (Durham, 1990, 1991). Given that many decisions organizations make are conceived through a cultural lens (Johnston & Everett, 2012), understanding social impact and gaining SLO can be interpreted through a cultural lens. While there are few ethnographic or cultural studies in public relations (Everett & Johnston, 2012; L’Etang, Hodges, & Pieczka, 2010), the importance of understanding how shared knowledge operating as organizational culture influences how organizational members enact, select, and retain (Weick, 1969, 1979) may prove fruitful to further the scholarship on social impact and SLO.

7. Conclusion

The social imperative in public relations provides momentum to work towards scholarship that contributes to a more civil society. The purpose for this special section was to contribute to that effort by embedding the concepts of SLO and social impact firmly within public relations vernacular and highlighting the utility of the concepts to both the theorization and practice of public relations. Sommerfeldt (2013) argued the normative role of public relations requires capacity building in public relations scholarship and finding ways that to contribute to democracy. A social imperative argues that the utility of social impact and SLO to deliver on this social imperative is clear, with engagement as a necessary conduit.

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