

TEACHING BRIEF

Vaccinate Against Hate: Using Activism to Teach Applied PR Research and Theory

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ABSTRACT

The social and political tensions of 2020 exposed an increased threat by hate groups attempting to spread extremist ideologies. Today, words have become weapons on social media and across all corners of the internet to persuade, recruit, mobilize and motivate. As undergraduate college students may seek to participate in activist work to combat hate and extremism, public relations research and theory can provide a roadmap for strategy.

Activism as a broad topic may pique the interest of many students and can be used to demonstrate the application of strategies, tactics, messaging and more. This activity attempts to situate activism into an existing introductory public relations course, by using it as the lens through which students examine the application of research and theory.

In this activity, students are given a fictional scenario: they have joined an anti-hate group on campus called Vaccinate Against Hate, which seeks to educate campuses across the country about hate groups and ways to fight the threat of extremist propaganda, conspiracy theories and calls to action. As a public relations student, they've been asked to work on developing a recruitment campaign, as well as an educational and awareness campaign for Vaccinate Against Hate.

Students will identify the research methods needed to craft Vaccinate Against Hate's first campaigns. Then, they draw on public relations theories to guide their strategy. Through this activity, students are introduced to and apply a myriad of research methods and public relations theories, as well as the role of public relations in an activist context.

Keywords: teaching brief, in-class activity, activism, research, theory, public relations

The social and political tensions of 2020 exposed an increased threat by hate groups attempting to spread extremist ideologies. Today, words have become weapons on social media and across all corners of the internet to persuade, recruit, mobilize and motivate. As undergraduate college students may seek to participate in activist work to combat hate and extremism, public relations research and theory can provide a roadmap for strategy.

As noted by scholars like Mules (2021), there is increased discussion about the relationship between public relations practice and activism. But this discussion has not made its way into public relations curricula, other than in reference to activists being seen as oppositional to the objectives of an organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2013). Given that activists have successfully applied public relations strategies and tactics to achieve their objectives for at least 100 years (Ciszek, 2015), the study of their work can make a positive contribution to public relations curricula (Mules, 2021).

And, as Coombs and Holladay (2012) see the incorporation of activism studies into the curriculum “as central to broadening students’ education, it also holds promise for re-imagining the field and legitimizing the works of activists as an important component in public relations theory and research.” (p. 347)

While the addition of activism studies to public relations curricula may take time, or simply not be possible for many programs, one step that can be taken now is to incorporate assignments or activities with a focus on activism into existing courses.

Activism as a broad topic may pique the interest of many students and can be used to demonstrate the application of strategies, tactics, messaging and more. This activity attempts to situate activism into an existing introductory public relations course, by using it as the lens through which students examine the application of research and theory. As

noted in the 2017 Commission on Public Relations Education report *Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State. Educators and Practitioners*, “Theory can get a bad rap because it sounds like all the stuff that never changes. In fact, public relations and public relations education, with our core commitment to research, are a master class in continually observing, questioning and adapting the theoretical drivers of what we do in practice. The world, the profession and education never stand still; our theory is in a similar state of adaptation.” (p. 16)

In this activity, students are given a fictional scenario: they have joined an anti-hate group on campus called Vaccinate Against Hate, which seeks to educate campuses across the country about hate groups and ways to fight the threat of extremist propaganda, conspiracy theories and calls to action. As a public relations student, they’ve been asked to work on developing a recruitment campaign, as well as an educational and awareness campaign for Vaccinate Against Hate.

Using Kathleen Kelly’s (2001) ROPES planning process (research, objectives, programming, evaluation, stewardship) as a starting point, students will identify the research methods needed to craft Vaccinate Against Hate’s first campaigns. Then, they draw on public relations theories to guide their strategy. Through this activity, students are introduced to and apply a myriad of research methods and public relations theories, as well as the role of public relations in an activist context.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES: This activity was used in Introduction to Public Relations and was created to align with the learning outcomes stated below. The student learning outcomes for this activity also correspond with selected student learning outcomes for the course:

- Develop an awareness of the role that public relations plays within an organization and its key publics
- Understand communication terms, theories, concepts and issues as

they relate to public relations

- Explore a range of real-life public relations scenarios through readings, discussions and assignments
- Enhance communication skills as well as the ability to work individually and as part of a team
- Demonstrate learning through discussions and assignments

EVIDENCE OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES:

This activity was created to align with the learning outcomes stated above.

Here is a brief sampling of responses to a post-activity survey:

- *Did this activity help you to develop an awareness of the role that public relations plays within an organization and its key publics?*

Response: 100% YES (26 responses)

- *Did this activity help you understand communication/public relations terms, theories and models?* Response: 100% YES (26 responses)

- *Did this activity help you better understand how theory applies to public relations?* 100% YES (26 responses)

What did you learn about public relations from this activity?

- “One thing that I learned about public relations from this activity was how different qualitative and quantitative research methods might be used to help inform a campaign.”

- “I learned more in-depth about the theories behind the practice of PR and how they are utilized.”

“That research is really important before starting any type of PR campaign.”

- “I learned about the specific research methods in a more in-depth way. Terms like two-step flow were introduced in a deeper way as well.”

- “A better understanding of applied theory.”

As part of the assignment, students were also asked to identify a key takeaway, which they delivered at the end of their group presentations. Comments ranged from noting increased knowledge about public relations overall to a better understanding of the theories they had read about. Students also reported a more in-depth understanding of the importance of research to inform public relations campaigns, and that they developed a better understanding of how different qualitative and quantitative research methods might be used in practice.

Finally, students reported that this activity introduced them to the role of public relations in activism – something many stated they had not considered.

CONCLUSION: The introduction and application of research and theory in an ungraded assignment may have helped students to think critically and creatively about the content and assuaged fear about “getting a bad grade.” Theory tends to be a tough pill for many students to swallow but students were generally enthusiastic about participating in this activity.

Most groups had an easy time applying appropriate research methods and could quickly distinguish between qualitative and quantitative methods. Persuasion models were applied mostly accurately with most groups identifying inoculation theory as one of the most applicable theories to the assignment. Given the relevance and prevalence of social media influencers today, it came as little surprise that students were interested in the two-step flow theory. Other media and mass communication models were applied with varying degrees of understanding. Management theories proved confusing, which was expected, given that this assignment was deployed in an introductory course.

Overall, students dove into this assignment with energy and enthusiasm despite any challenges due to participating via Zoom. Using

Google Slides, they created presentations that were well organized and demonstrated curiosity, critical thinking, and creativity. Ample time was provided for students to collaborate in class, which allowed them to adequately articulate their findings and present them to the class. As a result, most presentations exceeded expectations.

Future recommendations include providing students with an opportunity to conduct secondary research about activism prior to class in order to better prepare them for the assignment. Additional recommendations include adding details about the intended audience to the written directions, and revising the menu of theories provided to students, which notably did not include theories directly related to activism. Consideration may be given to remove the management models from the menu and replace them with activist theories. The addition of theories surrounding race, including Logan's (2021) Corporate Responsibility to Race (CRR), may also be added as appropriate to the course.

ASSIGNMENT:

Vaccinate Against Hate: Applying Research and Theory to the Fight Against Extremist Ideologies

This activity was created for an Introduction to Public Relations course in an online setting (Zoom) but can be adapted for upper-level research and theory classes, and/or to a course related to public relations and activism. It can also be easily adapted for use as an in-classroom activity.

Prior to class, students are asked to prepare for the activity by reading Page & Parnell chapter 4, and by listening to the segment "Neutralizing Hateful Propaganda," from "No Silver Bullets," an episode from WNYC's *On the Media* podcast (2021). The episode features Kurt Braddock, author

and professor of communications at American University, in a discussion about strategies and tactics to prevent radicalization before it happens.

In class, students are given the following fictional scenario:

Following a series of racist incidents involving members of the campus community, a student group has formed to combat hate and the proliferation of hate groups on college campuses across the country. The group, Vaccinate Against Hate, seeks to educate students about hate groups and works to find ways to combat the threat of extremism.

Vaccinate Against Hate needs communicators to help them recruit new members. As a student studying public relations, you have joined Vaccinate Against Hate to provide your expertise. You have been assigned two very important projects:

1. Develop a recruitment campaign in order to increase membership for the organization.
2. Research, plan and execute Vaccinate Against Hate's first educational and awareness campaign to combat extremist ideologies. Your campaign will involve strategic messaging, media outreach, and elements of media literacy training.

Using the ROPES planning process as a starting point, you will identify the research needed in order to craft these campaigns, drawing on public relations theories to guide your strategy. Once you have identified the research and theories needed, you will present your findings to the class to make connections between research, theory, and practice.

Students are then placed in breakout groups of 4-5 students per group (40 minutes):

Step 1: In your group, discuss the fictional scenario and apply the podcast

and fictional scenario to your readings.

Step 2: Discuss what strategies and tactics might be involved in the two campaigns for Vaccinate Against Hate.

Step 3: Create a slide deck that you will present to class. Required slides:

Slide 1: *Identify the primary research methods* that you would use in order to inform your initial recruitment campaign. Using the “Common Public Relations Research Methods” table (Page & Parnell, 2019, pg. 85) as a starting point, you will first consider the two type of research most appropriate: quantitative and/or qualitative. Then you will determine the appropriate method(s), which many include surveys, content analysis, digital analytics, focus groups, in-depth interviews and/or participant observation. Be specific in your responses and provide a rationale for using each method.

Slide 2: *Identify public relations theories* that will guide the strategy for your initial recruitment campaign. Using the “Ten Theories for Public Relations” table (Page & Parnell, 2019, p. 91) as a starting point, be specific in your responses and provide a rationale for using each theory.

Media and mass communication models include: Agenda Setting/Framing, Two-Step Flow, Spiral of Silence, Diffusion of Innovations, Uses & Gratifications. Persuasion models include: Elaboration Likelihood Model, Inoculation, and Cialdini’s Principles of Influence. Management Models include: Excellence and Image Restoration Theory.

Slide 3: *Identify the primary research methods* that you would use in order to inform your educational and awareness campaign. Using the “Common Public Relations Research Methods” table (Page & Parnell, 2019, p. 85) as a starting point, be specific in your responses and provide a rationale for using each method.

Slide 4: *Identify public relations theories* that will guide the strategy for your educational and awareness campaign. Using the table “Ten Theories for Public Relations” (Page & Parnell, 2019, p. 91), as a starting point, be specific in your responses and provide a rationale for using each theory.

Slide 5: Each team member will identify one key takeaway. What did you learn about the role of public relations in activism?

Step 4: Present your slide deck. Each team member must present one slide to the class. Each team has five minutes to present.

Additional Teaching Notes:

Suggested time allotment for an 80-minute class:

- Activity introduction: 5 minutes
- Group work: 40 minutes
- Presentations: 30 minutes
- Final remarks: 5 minutes

Suggestions for further reading for upper-level courses: These readings may provide useful for upper-level students and classes seeking to dive deeper into the application of attitudinal inoculation as well as the applied

use of persuasion in radicalization and counter-radicalization.

Braddock, K. (2019). Vaccinating against hate: Using attitudinal inoculation to confer resistance to persuasion by extremist propaganda. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 33(7), 1-24. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1693370>

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