

**Changing conversation and dialogue through LeadSA: an example of public relations activism in South Africa**

*Benecke, D.R. and Oksiutycz, A.*

*University of Johannesburg, PO Box 524, Auckland Park 2006, Johannesburg, South Africa.*

*[rbenecke@uj.ac.za](mailto:rbenecke@uj.ac.za) and [aoksiutycz@uj.ac.za](mailto:aoksiutycz@uj.ac.za)*

*Corresponding author: D R Benecke +27115591261, [rbenecke@uj.ac.za](mailto:rbenecke@uj.ac.za).*

---

**Abstract**

The words of Lund and Nabavi “we learn more about something if we talk about it” (2008, p. 27) highlight the importance of conversation and dialogue in bringing about change – be it in an organization or in society. In South Africa, given the country’s history, dialogue across ethnic, social and political divides does not come naturally. The need for changed and new conversations exists in South Africa. Despite celebrating 20 years of democracy South Africans still face many economic, social and moral challenges. These challenges manifest themselves through protest actions against the slow pace of improvement in the townships, frustration with lack of personal progress among young South Africans, a lack of tolerance and understanding of the “others” (Seekings, 2007). Unfortunately change takes time and concerted effort (Eyre & Littleton, 2013), trust must be built and is earned through participation in open dialogue and mutual negotiation (Bardhan, 2011, p. 97). Public relations activism as a manifestation of the postmodernist worldview and PR activists as change agents are at the heart of this exploratory study of the role of public relations in the South African society. The research aim of this article is to investigate the principles and methods used by Primedia Broadcasting South Africa’s LeadSA initiative to start and facilitate social dialogue and to contribute to social change. Data was collected by means of interviews with key decision-makers at LeadSA. In addition, a variety of documents, such as electronic newsletters, internal documents and research reports, were analysed. A case study approach was used to contextualise the theory and illustrate the principles and practices implemented by LeadSA.

**Key words:** South Africa, public relations activism, dialogue, third culture, postmodern public relations, agenda-setting

---

## **1. Introduction**

Public relations in a democratic context enables open, accessible and transparent dialogue between a diverse group of participants through relationship-building and the promoting of trustworthy and open communication, which involves a variety of media platforms. Public relations is a factor to establishing communication opportunities for voluntary participation by various publics and practitioners in order for them to influence the “conditions of their existence” and contribute to the development of social capital (Sommerfeldt, 2013, p. 283). Building trusting relationships with others whose opinions differ from one’s own is an essential precondition for change and the building of social capital. The media play an important role in assisting individuals to restore trust in one another, and public relations practices are essential for establishing communities which share a common purpose and contribute to a fully functional society (Sommerfeldt, 2013).

The research aim of this paper is to investigate the principles and methods used by Primedia Broadcasting South Africa’s LeadSA initiative to start and facilitate social dialogue and contribute to social change. The LeadSA initiative is discussed as an example of an organisation practising public relations activism in South Africa and whose public relations practitioners are actively involved as change agents in societal issues. The dialogic theory of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and third culture building (Casmir, 1999; Bardhan, 2011; Kent & Taylor, 2011) and the agenda-setting theory were used as theoretical frameworks in this article. Data were collected by means of interviews with key decision-makers at LeadSA. In addition, a variety of documents, such as electronic newsletters, internal documents and research reports, were analysed. A case study approach was used to contextualise the theory and illustrate the principles and practices implemented by LeadSA.

## **2. Public relations practitioners as change agents**

PR activism, as a dimension of a postmodern paradigm of public relations, challenges the normative views of the purpose and practices of public relations as promulgated by a functionalist approach to public relations. Traditionally, in public relations literature, activism was associated with the activities of activist groups (Guiniven, 2012; Jo, 2011; Reber & Berger, 2005; Kovacs, 2001). Organisational objectives and the interests of activist groups were seen as antagonistic forces. Because activist groups usually opposed organizational actions (Smith & Ferguson, 2010; Brown, 2010), the relationships between activist groups and organisations were expected to be managed by public relations practitioners in the

interest of the organisation's sustainability. This approach has its roots in excellence theory (Grunig & Grunig, 1992), which to a large extent represented an organisation-centric approach to public relations. Consequently, activism is often viewed as an issues management specialisation area of public relations, with its key focus on ensuring the future existence of organisations and the elimination of risk factors (Wakefield, 2007).

Today, the concept of activism has evolved significantly and new views on the role of activism have emerged which are consistent with postmodern organisational perspectives. Conflict is no longer perceived as a negative social phenomenon (Bourland-Davis, Thompson & Brooks, 2010, p. 409) with concepts such as "dissensus" and "tensors" included in a postmodern view of public relations. Tensors are events that may represent opposing or alternative views and the role of the public relations practitioner is to identify these tensors instead of striving for consensus (Holtzhausen, 2012, p. 63). Holtzhausen argues that dissensus, a concept introduced by Lyotard (1992), is needed in true transformation. These views call for the re-examination of the idea that public relations is inherently in service of corporate environments and political elites, by highlighting the application of public relations in service of activists and other organisations that represent social causes.

Defining public relations activism is difficult, as it relates more to a state of mind and the self-awareness of the practitioner than to a set of concepts. Holtzhausen (2012), speaking from a postmodern perspective, proposes that there is scope for public relations practitioners to assume the role of activists in organisations and society. The power struggle, competition and pervasiveness of conflict can be considered as basic assumptions behind postmodern society (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Therefore, the role of activist public relations practitioners is to stand up to oppressive power on behalf of those less powerful. Holtzhausen (2012, p. 64) states that activist behaviour "forms part of a whole and is not the only identifying attribute", but rather presents practitioners with the opportunity to question long-standing beliefs and introduce alternative points of view.

Public relations practitioners as change agents in the functionalist or modernist approach are viewed as boundary-spanning agents, responsible for the development of symmetrical communicative opportunities (Berger, 2007). In a postmodern view, public relations practitioners challenge issues of power, notably power on macro-levels such as organisations or government. A postmodern public relations activist not only challenges power structures

on macro-levels, but also promotes the negotiation of power on micro-levels, for example between individual practitioners (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Bowen (2008) argues that public relations practitioners are ideally positioned to assist organisations in understanding publics and their perceptions of the organisation. This understanding will include the active and passive involvement of public relations practitioners and stakeholders in societal issues, in organisational decision-making processes and in giving a “voice” to marginalised and unrepresented stakeholders (Holtzhausen, 2011, p. 158). Active involvement refers to activities planned to create opportunities for conversations and dialogue, requiring an attitude of resistance to normative thinking and practices from public relations practitioners, that lead to the sharing of thoughts and participation in conversations and dialogue that will contribute to social change. Change does not take place merely by having conversations and participating in dialogue; it needs to include a different manner of thinking and embracing relationships, serving the interests of both organisations and society (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Public relations practitioners should create opportunities for the development of new meanings based on different and opposing views, because creativity and innovative thinking is promoted in unstable and uncomfortable situations (Overton-De Klerk & Verwey, 2013). The emergence of online and mobile communication, interconnectivity and unlimited access to information has expanded the ways in which public relations practitioners can communicate with their publics (Radford, 2011) and take organization-publics conversations beyond organization-centred topics. Through the use of these communication platforms, organizations can participate in the societal dialogue, going beyond organisational problems (Hallahan, 2007) and thereby possibly influencing social change.

### **3. Dialogue and societal conversations**

Dialogue is the opportunity created by public relations change agents for sharing ideas, thoughts and opinions, and developing better understanding between participants, which leads to an “uneasy and uncomfortable” status resulting in change. According to Kent and Taylor (2002), dialogue and its relevance to PR is not new, as PR practitioners are instrumental in creating opportunities for engagement between different stakeholders. Leitch and Motion (2010, p. 102) stress the importance of meaning in dialogue. Meaning comes to life through interactions between people, values that guide the creation of meaning and shared realities of members of a particular public when engaging in meaningful dialogue. Holtzhausen (2012, p. 60) further identifies the collaborative and consensual nature of

dialogue and its place in the ethical practice of public relations. The resulting change may be evidenced in perception and/or actions.

Dialogue moves the focus away from actions which benefit a single organisation alone by introducing the principle of equality among communication partners, which should be seen as a product of ongoing and long-term communication and relationship-building (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 24). Key characteristics of dialogue identified by Kent and Taylor (2002) include mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment, and start with a willingness to continue a conversation in which participants are willing to give each other enough time to state their points of view and put their differences aside to appreciate the values and interests of the other. These key concepts are discussed briefly to indicate their relevance to mediated dialogue such as through a mass media channel like radio and, in this case, LeadSA.

*Mutuality* deals with the collaborative nature of society; what matters is not whose argument wins, but rather sensitivity to alternative points of view; using power to influence decisions is avoided and dialogical partners' needs, desires and views are made apparent (Kent & Taylor, 2002). *Propinquity* includes aspects of engagement, immediacy and understanding of historical and current events, as well as future trends. *Empathy* and support among dialogical partners for the communal benefit of all involves leaving one's own comfort zone and relating to the reality of somebody else's experiences. The *risk* associated with dialogue may be regarded as one of the key challenges facing public relations practitioners, because it presupposes that vulnerability and uncertainty may be some of the outcomes of dialogue. *Commitment* to the process is the final key concept necessary to effective dialogue, which is built on authentic, open conversation aiming to interpret the views of others and to develop understanding rather than to persuade or influence.

This approach to dialogue calls for the key role of PR to move away from primarily being a communication manager to becoming a change agent, and in this way renewing the standing of public relations practitioners and the credibility of the public relations profession (Holtzhausen, 2012). The development of ethical and legitimate public relations practices through dialogue and relationship-building is essential to improve the reputation of public relations and allowing it to regain its status as an "industry of stature and visibility" (Roodt, 2011, p. 22). Self-aware and task-orientated professionals acting as activists and reflective practitioners can increase the "likelihood of better understanding of each other and have

ground rules for communication” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 33). Self-awareness and a co-creational perspective are also relevant to culture when culture is seen as a dynamic process rather than an end-state, and therefore act as key concepts in building a third culture approach (Bardhan, 2011; Casmir, 1999).

Exploring the role of public relations activism in promoting change in a developing context, with specific reference to conversations, dialogue and third culture building, introduces both a conceptual and a pragmatic approach to postmodern public relations.

#### **4. Media as the social dialogue facilitator**

The role of the media in society has been a rich field of study in journalism and media studies. In contrast, public relations literature focused mainly on the media as a means to reach large and dispersed audiences when communicating on behalf of organisations (e.g. Hallahan, 2010a), influencing the public opinion and media coverage on organisational reputation (e.g. Kiouisis, Popescu & Mitrook, 2007) and achieving publicity for organisations (e.g. Halahan, 2010 b). Hallahan (2010a, p. 628) states that the primary value of the media lies in “their ability to create broad awareness of organisations’ causes, products, people”. The process of media influence has been a subject of research under the agenda-setting theory. agenda-setting refers to the phenomenon where mass media select certain issues and events and portray them prominently, which influences the public perception of the prominence of those issues. The traditional agenda-setting approach used to focus mainly on the salience of the topics (Regas, 2012); however, more recently the focus of second-level agenda-setting moved towards understanding the influence of media coverage on the comprehension of the issue (Carrol & McCoombs, 2003; Kiouisis et al, 2007, Kim & Kiouisis, 2012).

Although the literature on agenda-setting suggests that the media agenda affects the public agenda, there is also evidence that the process is not one-directional but multidirectional, with the public agenda affecting the agenda of the media (Uscinski, 2009; Regas, 2012). This is particularly relevant, considering the proliferation of social media platforms and the greater interconnectivity of individuals and other entities (Meraz, 2011). In particular, Kim and Kiouisis (2012, p. 658) refer to the process of public relations influencing the media agenda and consequently the public opinion as the *agenda building*. The capacity of agenda-building through public relations has been supported by research (Uscinski, 2009; Kim & Kiouisis,

2012). However, the public relations activities of news media organisations such as Primedia, including their capacity for agenda building, remain largely unexplored.

### **5. Developing of a third culture through social dialogue**

South Africa is a truly multicultural society, with many languages, tribes and ethnicities living together. Here cultural differences exist and at times present a barrier to nation-building. In a situation where divisions along race lines – which were perpetuated by the apartheid regime – are not yet entirely resolved, the need for third culture is particularly evident. “Third culture is premised on a dialogic orientation and shared meaning” (Kent & Taylor, 2011, p. 70). Third culture is a product of synthesis and accommodation (Shuter, 2012). Bardhan (2011) relates the basis of the third-culture building model to work done by Banks (1995, 2000) and Casmir (1999), which moves the emphasis away from the functionalist approach of the cultural interpreter-translator model towards an interpretive approach and dialogic model. For example, Casmir (1999) sees third-culture building as an outcome of a concerted process between human beings with different backgrounds, experiences and interpretations of value systems.

Third-culture building can develop only through interaction, which relates to the aspect of engagement found in the dialogical approach to public relations. People and culture are intrinsically bound, as culture is developed and lived by people (Casmir, 1999). Public relations practitioners are builders of culture because they are instrumental in organising engagements in which people have the opportunity to converse and take part in dialogue. Fundamental to the third-culture building model is the will to communicate across cultural divides, embracing the views of the “cultural Other”, and an interest in finding common ground to address issues of mutual concern, such as high rape statistics or dangerous road surfaces. Unlike other inter-cultural and multi-cultural approaches to communication and public relations, a third-culture building approach endeavours to collapse boundaries between cultures and co-create a new understanding and interpretation of each other. Differences can be addressed with a different mind-set which sees cultures and the “other” as co-creators of new meaning, solving problems creatively and benefiting from diversity (Bardhan, 2011, p. 93).

Public relations and the media have an interchangeable relationship in a postmodern society, as both contribute to the development and influence of public meaning and opinion (Ihlen &

van Ruler, 2011; Holtzhausen, 2012). Although the media is often associated with agenda-setting and sensationalism, it also has the responsibility to use its platforms as spaces for discourse and interaction (Weaver, 2011). Through activism, public relations and the media can move beyond their traditional roles and work together towards creative solutions for difficult societal issues.

The complex context of PR practice in South Africa includes a multiplicity of values, experiences and cultures, introducing the transcultural role of the PR practitioner, which requires a different way of thinking about personal cultural positioning and calls for what Bardhan (2011, p. 93) refers to as a “dynamic cultural identity” in order to influence intercultural practices.

## **6. Primedia Broadcasting’s LeadSA case study**

LeadSA was founded in 2010, after South Africa hosted a successful FIFA World Cup tournament in June–July 2010. Two major media groups in South Africa, Primedia Broadcasting and Independent Newspapers, partnered in an initiative to establish a platform to bring about social change, “to create a community where people become active” (Yusuf Abramjee, CEO LeadSA, 2014). Primedia Broadcasting, a division of Primedia Group – a South African company with a footprint in broadcasting, digital, marketing and advertising and events and entertainment businesses – is the home of LeadSA. Independent Newspapers is a newspaper group publishing more than 30 newspapers in three geographical areas of South Africa, namely Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. The LeadSA initiative calls on “all South Africans to make a difference; to stand up and do the right thing” (Primedia 2014).

Steered by Primedia Broadcasting and based on three main pillars which include education, environment and leadership, LeadSA promotes the development of a third culture by providing a platform for communication and allowing different groups, individuals and organisations to voice different opinions on the most pressing issues affecting South African society. The LeadSA initiative relates to the third-culture building model on two levels, namely society at the macro-level, in which people from different cultural backgrounds communicate to negotiate their differences, and on the individual at I-level, where power dynamics are negotiated to bring about change. LeadSA initiated and has been involved in numerous social change projects, ranging from individuals making a difference in their

communities to major national campaigns, such as the “Bill of Rights” project developed in partnership with the Department of Education, designed to influence change on a societal level.

Table 1: Summary of LeadSA projects (2010-2013)

| Year                          | Type of project                   | Category (Three pillars: Education, Environment, Leadership) |             |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|-------------|
| 2010                          | Bafana Bafana Parade              | Nation-building  |             |
|                               | Rhino Action Group                | Environment  |             |
|                               | Media Freedom                     | Social issue   |             |
|                               | Anti-crime summit                 | Social issue   |             |
|                               | Save Matric                       | Education  |             |
|                               | Hospital SOS                      | Social issue   |             |
|                               | 16 Days of Activism               | Social   |             |
|                               | Know your HIV status              | Education  |             |
|                               | 2011                              | Dial-direct pothole repairs                                  | Environment |
|                               |                                   | Name and shame   | Social      |
| Protea Friday                 |                                   | Nation-building  |             |
| Sing for Madiba               |                                   | Nation-building  |             |
| School Late-coming            |                                   | Education  |             |
| Bill of Rights campaign       |                                   | Education  |             |
| Bok Friday                    |                                   | National pride   |             |
| Black Tuesday (media freedom) |                                   | Social   |             |
| Youth matters – Fraud, school |                                   | Crime Line - social  |             |
| 2012                          | Tackling traffic problems         | Environment  |             |
|                               | Police widows and orphans         | Social   |             |
|                               | SA Olympic team send-off          | National pride   |             |
|                               | Car seats                         | Social/safety  |             |
|                               | Black Tuesday (media freedom)     | Social   |             |
|                               | Woza Online                       | Educational  |             |
|                               | LeadSA Hero of the Month campaign | Educational/social   |             |
|                               | International Aids Day            | Environmental/education                                      |             |

|      |                    |                    |
|------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 2013 | Stop Rape campaign | Social             |
|      | Drug Watch         | Educational/social |

## 7. Research methodology

The illustrative case study approach was used in this study. This approach was considered suitable for the current study because it supports an in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon and facilitates an understanding of it in a particular context. In this case, innovative PR practices in the context of the evolving South African society are presented (Collis & Hussey, 2009).

The main objective of the study was to identify the guiding principles underlying public relations practices undertaken by Primedia Broadcasting and LeadSA to initiate conversations, create platforms for dialogue and consequently contribute to third-culture building. The LeadSA initiative was researched as an example of the emerging role of the public relations practitioner as an agent of social change.

Data was collected through two in-depth unstructured interviews with key members of Primedia and LeadSA, as well as by means of a thorough study of organisational documents, media releases and Internet sources. LeadSA's electronic newsletters published between 2011 and 2013 were sampled, applying a typical case sampling method (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2003). The content analysis was used to identify the main themes. Annual project reports and media releases were reviewed to confirm the themes identified in the electronic newsletters. Project reports provided by the coordinator were also analysed and the type of project matched to the three key focus areas of education, environment and leadership. This was done in order to understand the kinds of projects in which LeadSA were involved in the three geographical areas of Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape.

A group interview with three key LeadSA staff members and a follow-up interview with the Gauteng coordinator were transcribed, themed and analysed, using the theoretical concepts included in the dialogical theory of Kent and Taylor (2002). These concepts include mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment and will be discussed by looking at the principles and practices followed by LeadSA.

## **8. Findings**

The key focus of the LeadSA initiative is to develop a movement of active citizenship. It includes principles such as a commitment to change; equal opportunities made available to residents of Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and the Western-Cape (three of the nine South African provinces) to be involved in projects; trust and honesty in relationships; selfless service to improve the lives of others; continuous effort and willingness to take a risk and finally, a positive regard for others. These principles, as revealed during the interviews and analysis of documentation, will be discussed in more detail. The various practices related to the different principles will serve as evidence.

A commitment to change was evident from the various projects embarked on during LeadSA's first three years of existence. LeadSA was founded by Terry Volkwyn, CEO of Primedia Broadcasting, as a result of the positive effect the FIFA World Cup 2010 had on national pride and the sense of cohesion among South African citizens. It was acknowledged that, through the founding of an initiative such as LeadSA, it is possible for a divided nation like South Africa to be united by a common goal. It was also evident that the media can play an active role in achieving cohesiveness, as they act as custodians of public opinion and illustrate the achievements and progress made in uniting a nation. Various projects aimed at building national pride were hosted by LeadSA and included "Protea Friday", which aimed at motivating South Africans to dress in cricket shirts on Fridays to support the national cricket team. This campaign was repeated for the national rugby team and the SA Olympic team send-off to the 2012 London Olympics.

On another level, LeadSA is committed to influencing social change in the most critical areas of South African society. This is evident in the various educational projects spearheaded by LeadSA, such as "Save Matric", which focused on assisting matriculants (grade 12 students of 2010) who were affected by a teachers' strike shortly before their final examinations. Other issues which affect educational success were identified, including late-coming, demotivated learners, drug abuse and violence. These were addressed with projects such as "The Bill of Rights", which is a formally curriculated educational programme developed in partnership with the national Department of Basic Education, promoting an understanding of individual rights and responsibilities. As one LeadSA and Crime Line activist explained: "We visit schools to promote the Bill of Rights but also stress the responsibility that each individual has to change society". Societal issues such as rape and drug abuse feature high on

the list of projects, with the “Stop Rape” campaign regarded as very successful in creating an awareness of the high incidence of rape in South Africa, giving rape victims an opportunity to speak out about their experiences and receive assistance. With rape and other violent crimes being among the highest in the world, LeadSA is committed to influencing change by hosting anti-crime summits and drug-watch and “Name and Shame” campaigns. Involvement in national initiatives such as “16 Days of Activism” and the annual World Aids day in December also featured in the project list and in the interviews. Environmental issues such as rhino poaching, public transport problems and road safety were some of the projects and campaigns featured in reports. What was evident in all of these records was the commitment to influencing change in a constructive manner by putting the issue on the agenda, promoting open dialogue about these issues and offering different approaches and solutions – working towards better understanding of the various points of view held by South African citizens.

Continuous effort is evident in the fact that some projects are presented annually, as well as the prominence given to some new or related issues as and when the need arises. Most projects are conducted annually, on the basis of the three pillars of education, environment and leadership. Although it seems that some projects may “peak” while others “drop” in the amount of publicity and airtime afforded to them, projects continue to feature as LeadSA initiatives. “We have peaks and drops, [it] depends [on] what we choose to be the focus for the next 3 months. Everything else does not die out, it just takes a little bit of a back seat – it cannot [die out] because people will still ask you about rape – especially on the website” (LeadSA coordinator). The Stop Rape campaign was initiated after a violent rape case, which resulted in the victim’s death. During the second anniversary of the event, LeadSA and the 702 Radio station (one of the LeadSA partners) restated the seriousness of rape and motivated citizens to take action, report cases and seek assistance from the various support organisations and government structures. This was done through the “Beep every three minutes” campaign, which demonstrates the incidence of rape in South Africa. This was further developed into a fresh focus of 365 days of “Action Against Women and Child Abuse” launched in December 2014.

The principle of equal opportunity presents all citizens in these geographical areas with an opportunity to be involved in the various LeadSA projects and campaigns. Platforms include a website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and events which provide open access to information, introduce various social issues and create awareness of opportunities for dialogue and

conversation, resulting in active involvement by a diverse group of citizens. One of the projects acknowledging supporters and social activists is called “LeadSA Heroes”. Individuals of all ages, cultures and genders can be nominated by communities for their role in changing society. They are recognised publicly and given a chance to become the LeadSA hero of the year. One of the youngest recipients of the ‘Hero of the Month’ title is a 9-year-old girl campaigning against rhino poaching. Feedback and comments are received via a mailbox link on the website, which is managed on a daily basis by the coordinators. The coordinators channel the many requests for support to possible supporters and organisations that may be of assistance. “We do not sponsor projects or offer financial assistance as we do not have the budget – our role is to promote active citizenship” (LeadSA CEO). The call is to every citizen to make a difference in his or her community by actively doing something, building relationships and forming networks.

South African society is facing many challenges as a result of its segregated past and, even though democratic processes have been in place for 20 years, mistrust and suspicion about the motives of others will take time to change. LeadSA stresses its non-profit character. It does not provide funds for the projects it supports but rather uses its media platforms to promote change in the behaviour of each citizen and his or her approach to societal issues. The issues that LeadSA chooses to be involved in are often inspired by news events. The initiative focuses on creating awareness of aspects such as drug abuse, potholes in roads, the health crisis in hospitals or fraudulent activities. LeadSA’s role in many of these cases is to open a public dialogue on issues – to bring it to the attention of the general public – and to investigate reasons and possible solutions. In the case of the potholes, awareness of the extent of the damage to roads and the effect it had on drivers and their cars resulted in an insurance company sponsoring the repairs of thousands of potholes.

An important principle in dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2002) is the willingness to take risks. As the outcome of dialogue cannot always be predicted, participants need to be willing to enter the situation from a position of uncertainty and vulnerability. This principle is also evident in the approach followed by LeadSA. Although issues such as media freedom, e-tolls and inability of the police to curb crime have the potential to polarise communities and create conflict, LeadSA opens the dialogue and opportunity to all involved to state their case through interviews, events and opinion pieces. Opposition and dissensus are welcomed in an attempt to find new solutions to issues and to involve ordinary people in creative problem

solving. This silences LeadSA critics who accuse the organisation of telling only positive stories or of not being realistic about the level of social collapse facing South Africa. Rather, the approach is to introduce issues and allow society to co-create solutions owned and supported by the wider population. Projects such as “Black Tuesday” and “Brandhouse Number One Taxi Driver” campaigns are excellent examples of risk-taking on the part of LeadSA, as they are willing to discuss openly such sensitive issues as taxi driver behaviour and to offer solutions through education and support from their networks.

The principle of service in the facilitation of dialogue, with specific reference to LeadSA, is the manner in which the organisation acts as enabler by using its substantial networks to assist individuals and organisations in achieving their goals. In the case of the 2014 Mandela Day’s 67 minutes of community service, various organisations were assisted by the volunteers organised by LeadSA. Other support structures are often promoted through the LeadSA platforms because of the assistance they may offer to volunteers and organisations. Two such organisations are “For Good SA” and “Community Hours SA”, which offer volunteer support and enable effective implementation of community projects.

A key principle and mind-set essential to effective dialogue is a positive regard for others. This is illustrated by LeadSA through its open communication and support for sensitive cases, such as a campaign that highlights the plight of police widows and orphans. An alarming number of law enforcers are killed while on duty and this often results in the widows and children finding themselves without adequate financial means. Being sensitive to the needs of others and addressing the issue in a constructive manner earned LeadSA the reputation of being the fastest growing brand in 2011 (Higgs, 2012) while FutureFact survey (2013) found that most respondents considered LeadSA to be a good idea. A brand awareness survey conducted in 2011 by the marketing and social insights company TNS South Africa, found that about 2.5 million South Africans in the main urban areas of Gauteng, Cape Town and Durban were aware of LeadSA. This awareness is at its highest among top lifestyle groups surveyed, with a consistent awareness among age groups younger than 60 years. The highest awareness is among citizens with tertiary qualifications and there are relatively small differences between gender and race categories (Higgs, 2012). Another testimony to the legitimacy of the brand is that LeadSA is frequently approached by commercial companies for product endorsement in order to gain acceptance among consumers (LeadSA coordinator,

2014). LeadSA is careful not to provide commercial endorsement; nevertheless, the extensive number of such requests serves as a testimony to the initiative's established legitimacy.

Public relations practices play an integral part in the effectiveness of the LeadSA initiative, as became evident during the various interviews conducted with the key Primedia staff involved in LeadSA. The small, dedicated staff of two coordinators ensures that requests and proposals are discussed by a committee made up of representatives from all the media partners and the parent organisation, Primedia Broadcasting. Proposals are screened and discussed to determine their relevance, other partners and networks are identified and support is offered, often in the form of publicity by the media partners. It was made clear during the interviews that the various partners have autonomy and that they each approach a selected campaign or project in their own unique manner. The general message is discussed and agreed upon, after which it is tailored to accommodate the various stakeholders of the partner organisations. Active involvement by the management of Primedia Broadcasting was also evident in that messages are sent asking employees to assist in projects and network opportunities are developed during their various engagements with external stakeholders. Such an unstructured and organic approach to the managing of the LeadSA initiative is probably one of the factors contributing to its success so far. This approach resonates with the emancipatory role of the media which goes beyond setting the agenda to one of active involvement in matters influencing individuals.

Managing the vast network associated with LeadSA presents a challenge to the coordinators, who should possess a considerable amount of personal awareness and must research social issues, staying informed of public opinion and various points of view. The coordinators need to develop a system of recording and updating information. Consistency in deciding which requests to follow up is aided by a committee that discusses proposals and requests before the coordinators are tasked with the implementation. The role of the coordinators is crucial, as they need to prepare proposals that are in line with the three pillars of LeadSA and that support the promotion of active citizenship. Integrated reporting may be another area where development is needed for LeadSA. Not all electronic newsletters were available on the website and press releases did not always correspond to the articles in the electronic newsletters. There is a need for an evaluation of the influence of LeadSA projects and campaigns but, with budget constraints, it is difficult to implement.

## 9. Discussion

A critical question that can be asked is how these LeadSA initiatives contribute to dialogue and ultimately to a different way of thinking – a third culture. The sheer breadth of the issues covered by various LeadSA projects and campaigns indicates a broad involvement and understanding of the myriad social problems that South Africa has to deal with. At the heart of the LeadSA philosophy is the idea that all citizens should get involved in addressing these problems, and the promotion of grassroots activism through the facilitation of dialogue, networking and partnerships in order to achieve positive change. This relates well to the points made by Weaver (2011) and Holtzhausen (2012) that the individual needs to be part of a critique of the normative status quo and a responsible role player in developing new meanings and morality.

It should be noted that LeadSA is separate from the corporate social investment programme of the Primedia group. CSI initiatives are driven by the Primedia Foundation and range from Crime Line to student bursaries and providing spectacles for underprivileged children. What makes LeadSA innovatively different is that Primedia, through its ownership of four popular radio stations and a news agency, Eyewitness News, as well as through partnership with the country's major newspaper group, Independent Newspapers, is well positioned to monitor the most topical issues in society and these are the main drivers, according to the interviews, of the choice of activities and programmes organised, supported and facilitated by LeadSA. A dual approach seems to be at the heart of Primedia's use of the various media platforms at their disposal: firstly, to inform their decisions by drawing from the salience of the societal issues as seen in agenda-setting; secondly to build the agenda for the very same platforms through their public relations activities in order to address issues facing South African citizens in their daily lives, for instance by focusing on the issues that would normally not be considered newsworthy by the journalists and the news media. Yet, from the perspective of the importance of facilitating social change and promoting grass root involvement, these issues are regarded as important by the practitioners of LeadSA. Thus, in line with the postmodern approach, the choice of initiatives for LeadSA is not driven by boardroom decision and modernist strategic planning processes, but rather by the genuine needs of society as they emerge from everyday issues.

Traditionally, PR practitioners were tasked with facilitating the dialogue between the organisation and its public. The innovative approach of the LeadSA initiative aims at

facilitating societal dialogue and driving active citizenship for societal change. This is an acknowledgment that effective change and a third culture can be built through the involvement of multiple players in society, like individual citizens at grassroots level, not-for-profit organisations, businesses and public entities.

It emerged from the interviews that, in terms of its practices, LeadSA focuses on creating a platform for a network of individuals and organisations that, through their know-how and engagement, make a difference in society. These changes happen through the challenging of entrenched societal practices, such as violence against women and children, drug use and transport issues. The 'Hero of the Month' project promotes everyday heroes through the LeadSA Website, which also provides publicity for the worthy initiatives initiated by others. As media organisations, the Primedia Broadcasting and Independent Newspapers are well-positioned to provide a communication platform for dialogue around pressing social problems by making issues public, starting conversations and building relationships (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

The third-culture model sees human beings as active, involved, able and concerned about their own involvement in any state of affairs or being which have to do with their survival, both physically and spiritually. The LeadSA initiative fits well within this model, as it is an active contributor to the creation of a third culture in South Africa, a culture that transcends race and ethnicity, traditions and customs, and creates new societal norms. As explained by Casmir (1999), third-culture building is an ongoing process, which does not lead to one end-state but rather is a process, which keeps conversation going. In this process, the participants develop an "understanding of and appreciation for others while negotiating purposes, standards, methods, goals and eventual satisfaction in a dialogic conversational setting" (1999, p. 108). It is clear, therefore, that LeadSA makes a significant contribution to the process, which begins with individuals – active citizens – and eventually leads to a change in the entire socio-cultural system of the country. Casmir notes that third-culture building takes time: "It is impossible to build third cultures with their lasting relationships and value systems in a short time" (1999, p. 112). The LeadSA initiative should be seen as one of many contributors to the dialogue necessary to effect social change over time.

## **10. Conclusion**

In this article we provided the case study of the LeadSA initiative as an example of public relations societal activism in South Africa. The initiative involves the cooperation of different media organisations that act as catalysts, initiators and facilitators of social dialogue and support active citizenship in South African society, a society, which is in transition from its unjust and divided past towards a modern prosperous society and a mature democracy.

South African society is scarred, and many years of racial segregation will require a concerted, long-term effort by active communities to bring about change. Change does not happen as a result of a single conversation, but conversations as a start to dialogical approach will set the scene for many more conversations and introduce a different approach to intercultural communication. Dealing with issues such as mistrust and conflict between cultures is not a management issue for public relations practitioners, but rather an opportunity to act as a change agent and activist by being self-aware and creating interactions and dialogues to deal with issues of common interest identified by society and not planned in a boardroom. Primedia is an example of a media organisation that is both the agenda-setter and the agenda-builder. Thus we argue that when applied to societal issues, both the media and the public relations practitioners can influence the agenda to facilitate social dialogue.

Although third-culture building is considered idealistic by some commentators, who suggest that it will not result in sustainable change but in change that will at best be temporary in a given situation (Bardhan, 2011 p. 97), we argue that public relations practitioners should investigate and create opportunities for dialogue which will provide other social actors with an opportunity to co-create a new understanding of mutual benefit and that, through such processes, new values become legitimised in the culture, thus creating the third culture.

## References

- Abramjee, Y. (2014). Group interview with LeadSA. Interview conducted on 29 Jan 2014.
- Banks, S.P. (1995, 2000). *Multicultural public relations: A social-interpretive approach*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Bardhan, N. (2011). Culture, communication and third culture building. In N. Bardhan & C.K. Weaver (Eds). *Public Relations in Global Cultural Contexts. Multi-paradigmatic perspectives*.(pp77-107). New York: Routledge.
- Bardhan, N. & Weaver, C.K. (2011). *Public Relations in Global Cultural Contexts. Multi-paradigmatic perspectives*. New York: Routledge.
- Berger, B.K. (2007). Public relations and organisational power. In E.L. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management. Challenges for next generations* (pp.221-235). New York: Routledge.
- Botan, C.H. & Taylor, M. (2004). Public Relations. State of the field. *Journal of Communication* 54, 645-661.
- Bourland-Davis, P.G., Thompson, W. & Brooks, F.E. (2010). Activism in the 20th and 21st centuries. In L.R. Heath (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of public relations* (pp.409-420). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Bowen, S.A (2008). The extent of ethics. In E.L. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management* (pp.275-298). New York: Routledge.
- Brown, E. (2010). Symmetry and its critics: antecedents, prospects and implications for post symmetry era. In L.R. Heath (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of public relation* (pp.277-292). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Caroll, C.E. & McCoombs, M. (2003). Agenda setting effects of business news on public images and opinions about major corporations. *Corporate Reputation Review*, 6(1), 36-46.
- Casmir, F.L. (1999). Foundations for the study of intercultural communication based on a third-culture building model. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* (23), 91-116.
- Collis, J. & Hussey, R. (2009). *Business research: a practical guide for under graduate and postgraduate students*. London: Palgrave.
- Coombs, W.T. & Holladay, S.J. (2012). Privileging an activist vs. a corporate view of public relations history in the U.S. *Public Relations Review*, 38, 347-353.
- Eyre, D.P. & Littleton, J.R. (2013). Shaping the zeitgeist: Influencing social processes as the center of gravity for strategic communications in the twenty-first century. *Public Relations Review* 38, 179-187.

- Grunig, J. E. & Grunig L.A. (1992). *Excellence in public relations and communication management*. New York. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Grunig, J. E. (2000). Collectivism, collaboration, and society corporatism as core professional values in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(1), 23-48.
- Guiniven, J.E. (2002). Dealing with activism in Canada: an ideal cultural fit for the two-way symmetrical public relations model. *Public Relations Review*, 28(4), 393-402.
- Hallahan, K. (2007). Integrated communication: implications for public relations beyond excellence. In E.L. Toth, (Ed). *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management. Challenges for next generations* (pp.299-339). New York: Routledge.
- Hallahan, K. (2010a). Public relations media. In L. R. Heath (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of public relations* (pp.623-641). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Hallahan, K. (2010b). Being Public. In L. R. Heath (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of public relations* (pp.523-544). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Higgs, N. (2012). *TNS South Africa media release*. Johannesburg, South Africa. Report supplied by Primedia Broadcasting.
- Holtzhausen, D. (2005). Public relations practice and political change in South Africa. *Public Relations Review*, 31, 407-416.
- Holtzhausen, D. (2011). The need for a postmodern turn in global public relations. In N. Bardhan, and C.K. Weaver, (Eds). *Public Relations in Global Cultural Contexts. Multi-paradigmatic perspectives* (pp.140-167). New York: Routledge.
- Holtzhausen, D. (2012). *Public Relations Activism. Postmodern approaches to theory and practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Holtzhausen, D. & Voto, R. (2002). Resistance from the margins: the postmodern public relations practitioner as organizational activist. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 14(1), 57-84.
- Ihlen, O & van Ruler, B. (2011). *Public relations and social theory: key figures and concepts*. New York: Routledge.
- Jo, S. (2011). Factors shaping activist's perception of corporate organisations: an empirical case from South Korea. *Public Relations Review*, 37(2), 178-180.
- Kent, M.L. & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review* 28, 21-37.
- Kent, M.L. & Taylor, M. (2011). How intercultural communication theory informs public relations practice in global settings. In N. Bardhan, and C.K. Weaver, (Eds). *Public*

- Relations in Global Cultural Contexts. Multi-paradigmatic perspectives* (pp.50-77). New York: Routledge.
- Kim, J.Y & Kiouisis, S. (2012). The role of affect in agenda building for public relations: implications for public relations outcomes. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 89(4), 657-676.
- Kiouisis, S., Popescu, C. & Mitrook, M. (2007). Understanding influence on corporate reputation: an examination of public relations efforts, media coverage, public opinion & financial performance from agenda-building and agenda setting perspective. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 19(2), 147-169.
- Kovacs, R. (2001). Relationships building as integral to British activism: its impact on accountability in broadcasting. *Public Relations Review*, 27(4), 421-436.
- Leitch, S. & Motion, J. (2010). Publics and public relations: Effecting change. In Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, Ansgar Zerfass, Jeong-Nam Kim, (Eds). *Public relations and Communication management, current trends and emerging topics*. New York: Routledge.
- Lund, D.E. & Nabavi, M. (2008). A duo-ethnographic conversation on social justice activism: exploring issues of identity, racism, and activism with young people. <http://www.ucalgary.ca>. Retrieved 18 Jan 2014.
- Meraz, S. (2011). Using time series analysis to measure intermedia agenda setting influence in traditional media and political blog networks. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 88(1), 176-194.
- Overton-De Klerk, N. & Verwey, S. (2013). Towards an emerging paradigm of strategic communication: Core driving forces. *Communicatio*, 39 (3), 362-382.
- Radford, G. (2011). Public relations in a postmodern world. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 1(1), 49-67.
- Reber, B.H. & Berger, B.K. (2005). Framing analysis of activist rhetoric: how Sierra Club succeeds or fails at creating salient messages. *Public Relations Review*, 21(2), 185-195.
- Regas, M. (2012). Issue and stakeholder intercandidate agenda setting among corporate information subsidies. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 89(1), 91-111.
- Roodt, Z. (2011). Recurring crisis of credibility, the state of Public Relations in South Africa. *Communitas*. 16, 15-31.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2003). *Research methods for business students*. Harlow, England: Prentice Hall.
- Seekings, J. (2007). Race, discrimination and diversity in South Africa. *CSSR working paper. Social Science Research*. <http://www.commerce.uct.ac.za>. Retrieved 25 Jan 2014.

- Shuter, R. (2012). On third culture building. In Deetz, S.A. (2012) *Communication Yearbook, Issue 16*. (pp. 429-436). New York: Routledge.
- Smith, R. (2009). *Strategic Planning for Public Relations*. 3rd edition. UK: Routledge.
- Smith, M.F. & Ferguson, D.P. (2010). Activism 2.0. In L.R. Heath (Ed.) *The Sage handbook of public relations* (pp.395-408). Los Angeles: Sage.
- Sommerfeldt, E.J. (2013). The civility of social capital in public sphere, civil society, and democracy. *Public Relations Review*, 39 (4). 280-289.
- Taylor, M. (2010). In R.L. Heath (Ed), *The Sage handbook of public relations*. (chapter 1, 1-11). *Books.google.com*. Retrieved 22 Jan 2014.
- Uscinski, J.E (2009). When does the public issue agenda affects the media issue agenda (and vice versa). Developing framework for media-public influence. *Social Science Quarterly*, 90(4), 796-815.
- Wakefield, R. I. (2007). Theory of international public relations, the internet, and activism: a personal reflection. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 20 (1). 138-157.
- Weaver, C.K. (2011). Public relations, globalization, and culture: framing methodological debates and future directions. In N. Bardhan, and C.K. Weaver, (Eds). *Public relations in global cultural contexts. multi-paradigmatic perspectives* (pp.250-275). New York: Routledge.