İSTANBUL
UNIVERSITY
P R E S S

Review Article / Derleme Makalesi

A theoretical discussion on the scope and the dimensions of activist public relations

Aktivist halkla ilişkilerin kapsamı ve boyutları üzerine teorik bir tartışma

Ebru AKÇAY[1]

[1]Assist. Prof. Dr., Başkent University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Public Relations and Publicity, Ankara, Turkiye.

ORCID: E.A. 0000-0002-4792-9680

Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:
Ebru AKÇAY,
Başkent University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Public Relations and Publicity, Ankara, Turkiye.
E-mail/E-posta: ebruakcay@baskent.edu.tr

Abstract

The concept of activist public relations challenging corporate public relations, which regards activist publics as the obstacles to an organization's effectiveness, brings up the activist function of public relations for discussion. The conceptualization of activist public relations asserts that public relations is used to oppose the corporate public relations contending that activist publics are obstacles for organizations and must be managed. This study aims to set forth the dimensions of activist public relations by introducing the studies claiming not only organizations (non-governmental organizations and corporations) but also activist publics and public figures, who are not members of any organization, use public relations tactics. The study proposes a categorization for the scope and dimensions of activist public relations. This categorization focuses on whether the activist publics are organized within an organization or not, and asserts that activist public relations has two dimensions: an 'organizational dimension' and 'societal dimension'. According to this categorization, organizational activism and the public relations practices of NGOs should be categorized under the 'organizational dimension' while Internet activism and the public relations practices of public figures should be categorized under the 'social dimension' of activist public relations.

Keywords: Activist publics, activist public relations, non-profit public relations, dissent public relations, protest public relations

Öz

Aktivist kamuları örgütlerin etkinliği için engel olarak gören kurumsal halkla ilişkiler literatürüne meydan okuyan aktivist halkla ilişkiler kavramsallaştırması, halkla ilişkiler pratiğinin aktivist fonksiyonunu tartışmaya açmaktadır. Aktivist halkla ilişkiler kavramsallaştırması, halkla ilişkiler pratiğinin aktivist kamular tarafından da kullanıldığını ileri sürmekte ve aktivist kamuları yönetilmesi gereken ve kurumlar için engel oluşturan kamular olarak gören kurumsal yaklaşıma

karşı çıkmaktadır. Bu çalışma ise, aktivist halkla ilişkilerin sadece kurumlar tarafından (sivil toplum kuruluşları ve şirketler) değil, aynı zamanda herhangi bir kuruma üye olmayan aktivist kamular ve kamusal figürler aracılığıyla da yapıldığını iddia eden araştırmaları tartışmaya dahil ederek, aktivist halkla ilişkilerin boyutlarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda çalışma, aktivist halkla ilişkilerin boyutlarına ve kapsamına yönelik bir kategorilendirme önermektedir. Aktivist halkla ilişkiler pratiğinin bir örgüte bağlı olarak yapılıp yapılmadığını temel alan bu kategorilendirme, aktivist halkla ilişkilerin 'örgütsel'

ve 'toplumsal' olmak üzere iki boyutunun olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Önerilen kategorilendirme çerçevesinde, örgütsel aktivizm ve sivil toplum kuruluşlarının halkla ilişkiler pratiklerinin aktivist halkla ilişkilerin 'örgütsel boyut'una, İnternet aktivizmi ve kamusal figürlerin halkla ilişkiler pratiklerinin ise aktivist halkla ilişkilerin 'toplumsal boyut'una dahil edilmesi gerektiği belirtilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aktivist kamular, aktivist halkla ilişkiler, kâr amacı gütmeyen halkla ilişkiler, muhalif halkla ilişkiler, protestocu halkla ilişkiler

Introduction

Activism and activist publics have negative connotations in the dominant literature of public relations history and public relations approaches. According to the dominant narration of public relations history, the profession of public relations began with the public relations practices of organizations that felt pressured to respond to activist publics. As a result, activist publics continued to be defined as 'obstacles' limiting companies' effectiveness that needed to be managed.

However, from the late 1990s and 2000s, with the realization that activists also use public relations strategies and tactics, debates about whether activist public relations was possible or not began to sprout. In this period, calls were made to discuss the role of activists in public relations literature (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 349). These calls were directed by the need to overcome the dominant approach that defines activist publics as publics that create pressure and pose problems for companies, and that activists can be defined as practitioners of public relations, per se. Activist public relations literature that developed after these calls drew activist publics, who had been ignored by the field, to the focus of public relations research. As a matter of fact, the realization that activists practice public relations instead of posing obstacles to companies were declared as an "epiphany in the field" (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, p. 72). In fact, there are two approaches in public relations literature in terms of activism. One states that activism and public relations have different natures, the other asserts that activism was a branch of public relations (L'Etang, 2016, p. 208).

The idea that activists could be defined as practitioners of public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Ciszek, 2015; Toledano, 2016) challenged both the negative connotations

of activist publics and the narration of public relations history that positioned activism as a "catalyst" (Smith, 2013) in the dominant public relations literature. Within this context, it was argued that activists/activist organizations in the abolitionist movement, suffragette movement, civil rights movement, feminist movement and environmental movement used public relations practices (Byerly, 1993, p. 14).

The use of public relations practice by activist publics organized by non-governmental organizations points to a difference from the public relations practices of for-profit organizations. Discussions about the fact that public relations had an activist function as well as its institutional function (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 348) explained the existence of activist public relations. Activist public relations, which is defined as the use of public relations for activist purposes and/or by activist publics, includes the communicative activities of activist publics, who are not affiliated to any organization, and public figures, as well as organizations that use public relations practice for activist purposes.

This study argues that activist public relations has two dimensions: 'organizational' and 'social'. These two different dimensions of activist public relations are based on whether activist public relations are carried out under the umbrella of an organization, whether it is a for-profit or non-profit. The use of public relations by NGOs and profit-oriented organizations for activist purposes constitutes the 'organizational dimension' of activist public relations, and the use of public relations tactics by "ad hoc publics" and individuals constitutes the 'social dimension' of activist public relations. Involving both organizations and publics in activist public relations means opening up the practices ignored by the field to discussion. For this reason, in this study, after tracking briefly the role and the place of activists in the dominant public relations literature and public relations history, what activist public relations is and by whom it is carried out will be discussed. In the last part of the research, a categorization of the scope and dimension of activist public relations will be proposed.

The place of activist publics in the history of public relations

It is a matter of debate about when and how the public relations profession began to be practiced. There are different inclinations on how to define public relations and different assumptions about the history of public relations. The dominant public relations literature suggests that public relations began in the United States with corporate

responses to activists- muckrakers such as Ida Tarbell, Jacob Riis, and Upton Sinclair who exposed the corruption of corporations and society at the time (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). The muckrakers in question used mass media like books, newspapers, and magazines to reveal social problems and corruption in the USA (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, p. 77). For example, Ida Tarbell exposed J. D. Rockefeller's unfair and aggressive practices at Standard Oil, Upton Sinclair exposed the poor conditions in the slaughterhouse industry, and Jacob Riis exposed the poor living conditions in American slums. In response to these social issues of the American public, corporations tried to cover up the corruption unleashed by the muckrakers; they hired journalists such as Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays, Pendleton Dudley, John Hill, and Carl Byoir to promote their companies in the press (Yıldırım Becerikli, 2005, p. 59).

In his book titled *Propaganda*, Bernays (1928, p. 41) argued that the distinctive function of the public relations consultant first emerged as a result of muckraking activities in the early years of the 20th century. Bernays' narrative dominated the narration of public relations history. So much so that it was repeated in public relations textbooks that public relations began as a response to muckrakers (Vos, 2011, p. 122). For example, it is repeatedly stated that Ivy Lee was hired by Rockefeller to respond to labor activism (Smith, 2013, p. 6).

Such a perspective on the history of public relations not only shows that public relations developed with a business-oriented perspective, but also gives a clue about the place of activism and activists in the history of public relations. In public relations literature, it is stated that activism acts as "one of the catalysts" (Smith, 2013, p. 6). This historical narrative limited the role of activists as only an initiator of public relations activities.

Studies challenging this dominant approach, which claimed that public relations started with organizational activities initiated as a response to activists, writers, and journalists revealing social problems, have started to increase since the 1990s. These studies argued that the narration and claims that public relations history began in the 20th century was not sufficient to make sense of and historicize the diversity and social dimensions of public relations practice. According to this argument, the practice of public relations had a much longer history than the dominant historical narration claimed.

Coombs and Holladay (2012) argued that public relations practice did not begin with responses to muckrakers, contrary to what the history of corporate public relations claimed. Muckrakers, who were themselves "original public relations practitioners", encouraged companies to influence their stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, p. 87). In short, the alternative narration of public relations history argued that public relations practice began long before the dominant narration's claims. In this respect, Coombs and Holladay (2012, p. 349) challenged the dominant narration of public relations by underlining that activists used public relations tactics almost 70-80 years before the corporations. Similarly, according to Byerly (1993, p. 16), before the public relations profession developed, public relations was practiced.

Activist publics and sovereign public relations as 'obstacles'

The dominant historical narration of public relations shaped the way activist publics were positioned and defined. The organizational approaches, which did not define activists as public relations practitioners, perceived activists as external publics (Ciszek, 2015, p. 448), which resulted in prevalent conceptualization of public relations as a management function.

While some public relations definitions conceptualized public relations as 'communication management', some defined public relations as 'relationship management'. For instance, J. E. Grunig (2005, p. 15) defined public relations as "the management of communication between an organization and the publics that concerned that organization". On the other hand, the relationship management approach emphasizing the relations between organizations and their publics, was defined as balancing the interests between the organization and its publics through organization-public relationship management (Ledingham, 2009, p. 117). This 'management' approach, which dominates the public relations literature, whether it was called the management of communication or relations between organizations and their publics, resulted in a proliferation of studies that ignored the use of public relations for activist purposes and conceptualized activist publics as problematic groups that needed to be managed and controlled for organizations' interests.

In the dominant public relations literature in which activism/activist publics had negative connotations, the majority of the studies assumed that activists pose problems for the effectiveness of organizations. In fact, public relations approaches such as role

theory, systems theory, problem management, situation theory, and excellence theory, which constitute the dominant literature, defined activist publics as groups that had the potential to harm organizations and therefore needed to be managed (Ciszek, 2015). Activist publics were at best described as the most strategic group for organizations because activist publics had the potential to put organizations in difficult situations (Grunig, as cited in Thompson, 2016). Indeed, L. A. Grunig (2005, p. 528) defined activist publics as communities organized to put pressure on an organization for a purpose. J. E. Grunig (2005, p. 36) also underlined that activists played the most important role in limiting an organization's ability to achieve its mission. In these definitions, the reason for the existence of the activists is not based on public interest and social change, but on putting pressure on the organization. This points to a practice that ignores the necessity of activists in democratic processes. For this reason, in the dominant public relations literature, activists are defined as obstacles or problems for organizations. In short, seeing activists as obstacles for organizations is closely related to their definition as groups that need to be managed and responded to.

Within this context, the demands and pressures of activist publics are described as a crisis that needs to be responded to. The title of the study by L. A. Grunig (2005) in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* supported this idea: "Activism: How It Limits the Effectiveness of Organizations and How Excellent Public Relations Departments Respond". The title of L. A. Grunig's work revealed how activists were perceived in public relations literature. Here, activists not only restrict the effectiveness of organizations, but were also in the position of obstacles that required organizations to 'respond'.

Dominant public relations literature claims that activists' limiting the effectiveness of the organization and posing potential risks to the organization forces organizations to carry out excellent public relations. Grunig (1989, p. 3) stated that the fact that activists created problems for an organization created the need to create better public relations programs. In other words, the presence of activist publics enabled organizations to make better public relations and develop their public relations programs (Grunig & Grunig, as cited in Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Seeing activist publics as boosters for organizations' success implies that activists are evaluated in both a positive and a negative context. On the one hand, activists are perceived as barriers to organizations' success and on the other hand, they are perceived as strategic publics that enable organizations to develop excellent public relations programs. However, this 'positive'

perspective towards activists cannot escape from being organization-oriented because a 'positive' aspect of the activists is not explained with their contribution to social transformation, public interest, and democratic processes; but with the fact that they help organizations to develop effective public relations programs.

While activism used to be limited to local impact, nowadays activist initiatives via the Internet can have a global impact in a short time, forcing organizations to respond (Wakefield, 2007). In other words, the Internet "continually raise[d] the bar of their [organizations'] own public relations" (Klein, 2000, p. 438). According to Yıldırım Becerikli (2008, p. 440), "the power and influence of activist groups has reached an indisputable level today". The effect of the Internet has reached such a level that an organizations' success is measured with the responses that the organization gives. For instance, if organizations compromise with the activists, it is considered as a successful public relations campaign; or if the organizations fail to conduct a good communication campaign against activists, their case is defined as a 'public relations disaster' or a 'public relations fiasco'.

For this reason, public relations studies that dealt with activists generally focused on the responses of organizations to activist groups (Yıldırım Becerikli, 2008; Toledano, 2016). For example, Oliver (1991) grouped how organizations responded to activists in five different categories. According to Oliver (1991, p. 152-159), organizations could yield to activist publics, negotiated with activist publics, ignored them, challenged them, or manipulated them.

Grunig and Grunig (as cited in Smith & Ferguson, 2001, p. 298) listed how organizations should respond to activists: 1) listening to all strategic publics, 2) providing information and telling the story of the organization, 3) maintaining communication with activists, 4) recognizing the legitimacy of all public groups, 5) enabling qualified practitioners to achieve two-way symmetrical communication, 5) aiming for long-term effectiveness, and 6) PR practitioners' being in the dominant coalition so that the organization can better respond to activists. The items listed by Grunig and Grunig have a normative nature because although this approach seemed to care about two-way communication such as listening to activists, informing them, and acknowledging their legitimacy, the activists' pressure was instrumentalized for good public relations campaigns. In this respect, the two-way communication approach falls short of explaining activist public relations (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000).

The literature focusing on how organizations defeat activists does not see public relations being used for activist purposes as well (Stokes & Rubin, 2010, p. 30) and falls short of understanding public relations initiatives at the societal level. This situation is reinforced by the selection of successful examples from for-profit organizations in public relations research (Heath & Waymer, 2009, p. 195). However, if public relations is limited to for-profit organizations' initiatives, there is a risk that activist initiatives will be overlooked (Heath & Waymer, 2009, p. 195). The concept of activist public relations introducing activist initiatives to public relations literature, aims to close such a gap.

Activist public relations

While Smith and Ferguson (2001) stated that not only organizations but also activists used public relations to achieve their goals, Toledano (2016) underlined the need to expand the limitations of corporate public relations and organizations need to learn from the public relations tactics of activists. Extending the boundaries of corporate public relations is possible by focusing on who practices public relations. Coombs and Holladay (2014, p. 64) stated that it was necessary to see activists as public relations practitioners, contrary to the dominant approach that saw activists as 'obstacles'.

"Through the Internet, activism has become a global phenomenon" (Wakefield, 2007, p. 151) and the fact that the Internet reduces costs and increases the speed of information dissemination has enabled activist publics/organizations to carry out public relations initiatives. "The beauty of the Net for activists is that it allows coordinated international actions with minimal resources and bureaucracy" (Klein, 2000, p. 395-396). Activist publics organized via the Internet have made their voices heard in the public sphere, attracted the attention of public relations researchers; therefore, studies that position activist publics as public relations practitioners, contrary to the dominant literature (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Smith & Ferguson, 2001; Coombs & Holladay, 2014) have increased.

Recognizing that not only for-profit organizations but also activist publics and activist organizations use public relations, it is necessary to distinguish between the public relations activities of for-profit organizations and the public relations activities of non-profit organizations. In fact, Coombs and Holladay (2012, p. 348) emphasized that public relations has both an activist function and a corporate function. Likewise, Thompson (2016) distinguishes between "corporate PR" and "activist PR". This distinction

alleges that both for-profit organizations and activists use public relations, and as a result two different practices emerge. As a matter of fact, the adjective 'activist' used in activist public relations implies that there are two different public relations practices, activist and non-activist. In other words, when public relations is characterized as 'activist', 'activist public relations' refers to a practice different from the original 'public relations', which is non-activist.

Activist public relations can be defined as "the use of public relations strategies for activism" (Sancar, 2017, p. 3). In extant literature, activist public relations is also titled as "non-profit PR" (Heath & Waymer, 2009, p. 213), "dissent PR" and "protest PR" (Moloney et al., 2013). By arguing that the concepts of "activist PR", "dissent PR" and "protest PR" can be useful to rewrite the history of public relations, Moloney et al. (2013, p. 3) defined dissent public relations as "the dissemination of ideas, commentaries, and policies through PR techniques in order to change current, dominant thinking and behavior in discrete economic, political and cultural areas of public life". Moloney et al. (2013, p. 3) added that protest public relations "is also persuasive communication but not principally about ideas, behaviours and policies. Instead, it persuades in order to implement those ideas, behaviours and policies into law, regulation and other forms of executive action" (Moloney et al., 2013, p. 3).

To be able to talk about activist public relations, public relations strategies must be used for activist purposes by activist publics/organizations or by for-profit organizations. For this reason, activist public relations is closely related to with what purpose and by whom the public relations is being practiced. In this respect, NGOs are defined as the main practitioners of activist public relations (Sancar, 2017, p. 3). Activists use public relations for two main reasons: to correct the problems they identify and to ensure the continuity of their organizations/movements (Smith & Ferguson, 2001, p. 294). Activists use public relations through boycotts, demonstrations, symbolic demonstrations, media relations, interviews, and press conferences to influence the public and continue their efforts (Smith, 2013, p. 7). Jackson divides the tactics used by activists into five groups:

1) "informational activities including interviews and other media relations techniques;

2) symbolic activities including boycotts;

3) organizing activities such as distributing leaflets, networking, and holding meetings;

4) legalistic activities such as petitions, lawsuits, filing legislation, testimony at hearings, [and] prodding regulatory and administrative agencies; and

5) civil disobedience such as sit-ins, blocking traffic, [and] trespassing" (as cited in Smith & Ferguson, 2001, p. 296).

According to Smith (2013, p. 7) activists tend to hold large-scale protests or violent demonstrations to dramatize a problem or mobilize the public. However, Toledano (2016, p. 284) argued that activists also use dialogue. For NGOs, public relations serves purposes such as creating funds, establishing loyalty with the public, improving their reputation, and gaining trust in the public (Özdemir & Aktaş Yamanoğlu, 2010, p. 15).

The fact that the activists' use of public relations tactics has begun to be accepted in the field also paved the way for the comparative analyses of public relations tactics of companies and activist organizations, which resulted in the emergence of a research topic called 'PR battles'. For example, Stokes and Rubin (2010) examined the "public relations battle" of an anti-smoking group called Philip Morris and the Group to Alleviate Smoking Pollution (GASP). The study revealed that GASP, which campaigned for smoke-free restaurants, used more successful tactics than Philip Morris, which developed a program to separate smoking areas from non-smoking areas in restaurants (Stokes & Rubin, 2010, p. 41). Likewise, in his study, McQueen (2015, p. 122) examining the "PR wars" of activists, especially Greenpeace with oil giants BP and Shell, stated that there is no real dialogue between activist groups and companies, and that communication takes place more asymmetrically.

By challenging the idea that activists and public relations practitioners are antagonists, Reyes (2018, p. 244) put forward that "public relations practitioners and activists as the same people, that is, not oppositional actors." Reyes (2018, p. 250) made interviews with the Members of the Occupy Wall Street Press Relations Working Group, whose work included media relations such as doing interviews, press releases, editorials, e-mails and creating content for webs sites and social media. Reyes (2018, p. 257) concluded that public relations could be used by the powerless and weak publics as a "discursive power". Likewise, Ciszek et al. (2021, p. 307) argued that activist public relations has a power to challenge hegemonic discursive narratives of institutional

texts. To document their argument, Ciszek et al. (2021, p. 300) examined how transgender women activists challenge hegemonic discourse on gender transgression based on an institutional text, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In a similar vein, Wolf (2019, p. 182) claimed that activists can create "critical counter-voices" against the powerful. In her case study research, Wolf (2019, p. 179) examined the campaign called "Save Beeliar Wetlands" in 2017 West Australian state election and concluded that activists can be "seen as challengers of symbolic processes". Wolf's study (2019) results showed that activists are not heterogeneous groups, and they have legitimate interests. Besides, compromise does not have to be reached every time between activists and the governments. Wolf stated (2019, p. 180) that those three assumptions create a contrast with the foci of activist public relations literature. Likewise, L'Etang (2016, p. 207) stated that one should be careful when glorifying activism and when regarding activist publics as "a homogeneous category."

In activist public relations literature, there are examples through which campaigns make publics become activists. For instance, Mummery and Rodan (2019) examined the campaign called "Make it Possible" launched by Animals Australia, which is an animal advocacy organization. The writers concluded that the campaign helped the consumers become vegans/vegetarians, ethical consumers and even activists. Williams et al. (2022) examined how media frames local animal activists' public relations tactics during a clash between animal activist groups and Australian farmers in 2019. Their case study exposed the fact that animal activists are framed negatively in media (Williams et al., 2022). Williams et al. (2022, p. 417) and concluded by suggesting that future studies should focus on other activist publics and their representation on media.

As Bhagwat et al. (2020, p. 6) put it, "corporate sociopolitical activism" (CSA) may have a negative impact on firm value, and even "the positive links between CSA and firm outcomes can be uncertain". Bhagwat et al. (2020, p. 17) stated that positive impact can be reached with the condition that the corporate's sociopolitical activist efforts are in accord with the stakeholders' political views. Otherwise, corporate sociopolitical activism cannot impact firm value positively. In a similar manner, Pasirayi et al. (2022, p. 22) conceptualized corporate sociopolitical activism as "a risky strategy" because corporate sociopolitical activism affects firm value adversely. Although there is literature on corporate activism, there are few studies that focus on the effect of corporate sociopolitical activism on firm value (Pasirayi et al., 2022). The main reason for this result is that "reactions to sociopolitical stances may vary by stakeholder group" (Pasirayi et

al., 2022, p. 24). Sanchez et al. (2022) argued that corporate activism can have both positive and negative impacts. That is, corporate activism can affect the corporation' finance positively if the corporation is not among the controversial sectors such as alcohol, arms or tobacco whereas "social rights-based activism produces a negative effect" (Sanchez et al., 2022, p. 15).

Although there are a number of studies focusing on activist public relations, Sejrup (2014, p. 65) argued that critical public relations literature lacks studies of activist or advocacy organizations' public relations efforts focused especially on marginalized and non-western publics. Activist public relations literature also underestimated "the political dimensions of struggle and change" (L'Etang, 2016, p. 207). However, there are also recent studies which conceptualize activist public relations in term of democracy, ethics and politics. For instance, Demetrious (2022, p. 371) conceptualized the practice of deep canvasing in political campaigns as an activist public relations. Thus, Demetrious (2022, p. 374) placed activist public relations within the concept of civil society and asserts that publics transforms from being citizens to being voters in such a conceptualization.

Companies as practitioners of activist public relations: organizational activism

Recently, there has been an increase in studies suggesting that activist publics/organizations are not only practitioners of activist public relations, but also that profit-oriented organizations use activist public relations. These studies argue that companies and brands can act like activists, and these public relations and advertising activities are combined with concepts such as 'organizational activism', 'corporate activism' or 'brand activism'. While organizational activism/corporate activism is defined as organizations' opposition to government policies by Holtzhausen & Voto (2002, p. 63), Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020, p. 461) defined organizational activism as "as a company's willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment." Corvellec & Stål (2019, p. 8) asserted that "corporate activism participates in the efforts of corporations to actively shape their institutional environment by influencing, for example, the nature of competition, existing legislation, or social standards".

The stance of an organization as an activist is closely related to the activist role of public relations professionals in an organization. According to Holtzhausen (2000, p.

105) who defined public relations practitioners as the "conscience of the organization", the postmodern public relations practitioner has a role to challenge the dominant views and practices in the organization, and the title of "conscience of the organization" is one of the titles that public relations practitioners proudly claim. Public relations practitioners practice their activist role as 'conscience of the organization' by resisting dominant power structures, prioritizing the public and employees of the organization, making the most humane decisions in situations they encounter, and encouraging new ways of thinking and problem-solving towards problems (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002, p. 64). Therefore, "organizational activism" emerges with the situational ethical decisions of practitioners, their desire for change, their resistance to hegemonic structures, and their prioritization of employee representation (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002, p. 57).

In their study, Holtzhausen and Voto (2002, p. 57) interviewed sixteen public relations practitioners to examine how public relations practitioners play an activist role within the framework of postmodern public relations. By bringing diversity, conflict, knowledge/power, and resistance into discussion, postmodernist public relations differs from the managerial/functional approach, the system approach and the modernist approach, which is referred to as the theory of excellence (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). The public relations specialist, who plays an activist role by resisting the power marginalizing people, also resists the dominant structures and discourse in society and serves the organization by become an activist (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Holtzhausen and Voto (2002, p. 63) cited Benetton's campaign against the death penalty as examples of organizational activism. Besides, Allagui (2017, p. 265) evaluated the Sprite Cricket Stars, Coca-Cola Hello Happiness, Taking Home Happiness, The Pride Initiative projects carried out in the United Arab Emirates as the examples of organizational activism and asserts that companies find new ways to raise awareness about social issues, when governments use force to protect the status quo.

It is crucial to note that although organizational activism is gaining importance in the field, activist public relations is generally carried out by non-profit organizations. In her study, Gülal Şahin (2021) found out that for-profit organizations carry out activist public relations less than activist publics and organizations do. There are also studies investigating which handicaps public relations practitioners face when they resist the organizations they work for. For example, after in-depth interviews with 20 public relations practitioners, Sen (2022, p. 13) found that practitioners, who resist organization,

have to quit their jobs or experience a decrease in their salaries. Besides, public relations professionals' activism is based on "moral impulse", and they do not use social media as an activist tool contrary to expectations (Sen, 2022, p. 13). And most importantly, Sen (2022, p. 19) concluded that "postmodern PR activism holds a precarious position".

Discussion and Conclusion

From being regarded as "enemy", "threat", "other", and "components to be dealt with" to being regarded as the "main component" of public relations, activists have always been an inherent part of public relations (Karaaslan Şanlı & Bozkurt, 2022, p. 74). Therefore, it would be wrong to argue that public relations tactics are only used by organizations; it is also used by publics that are not affiliated with any organization and are organized via the Internet (Akçay, 2020). For this reason, activist public relations seems to have two different appearances. On one hand, there are organizations using public relations for activist purposes; on the other, there are 'ad hoc publics' who are not members of any organization using public relations. Activist public relations can be examined in two dimensions as 'organizational' and 'social' as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Dimensions and types of activist public relations
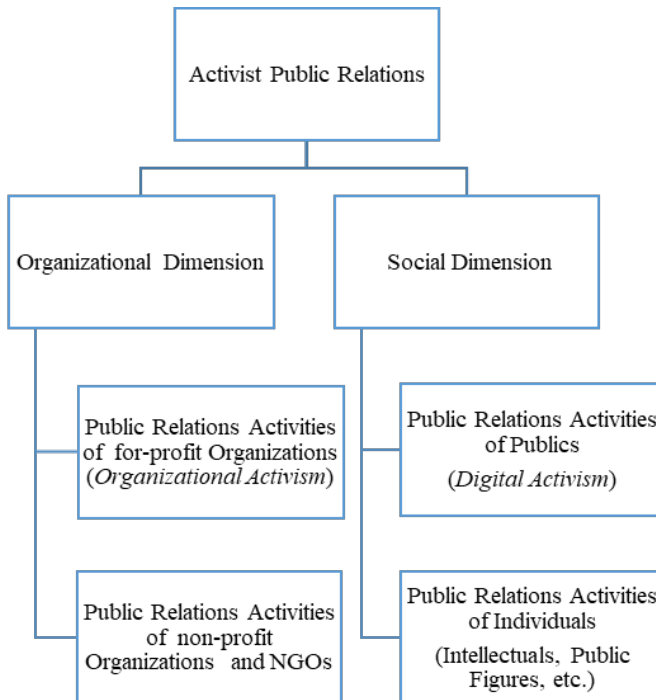
The organizational dimension of activist public relations includes activist use of public relations by organizations, regardless of whether they are for-profit or not. What is important at this point is that activist public relations is carried out under the umbrella of an organization and by using the resources of the organization. For this reason, activist public relations practices of NGOs and activist public relations practices of for-profit organizations (which is known as 'organizational activism') constitute the organizational dimension of activist public relations.

First of all, the public relations activities of NGOs and public interest organizations can be evaluated under the organizational dimension of activist public relations. In this respect, it is possible to find examples of activist public relations in the 'public relations wars' between activists and corporations. For example, Greenpeace's campaign after BP's oil spill crisis in Deepwater Horizon is an example of successful activist public relations (Moloney et al., 2013, p. 6). Similarly, Sancar (2017, p. 15) stated that public relations activities implemented by activist groups and non-governmental organizations to achieve their goals are also included in the field of activist public relations (2017, p. 15). Within the scope of the campaign, press releases were used, the media visibility of the campaign was ensured, advocacy was carried out, and individuals and institutions were invited to turn off the lights (Sancar, 2017, pp. 10-12). At the end of her study, Sancar (2017) stated that the basic activist public relations strategy used in the campaign were direct action, media relations and advocacy.

Moloney et al. (2013) gives an example of activist public relations of a labor union. Communication activities such as demonstrations during and after the 1980-1981 strike of Solidarność, a labor union in Poland, poster/brochure/wall painting, media relations, branding, lobbying and distribution of other publications are examples of activist public relations (Moloney et al., 2013, p. 7-8). In this context, public relations activities of non-governmental organizations and trade unions operating at an international, national, and local level can be included under the 'organizational dimension' of activist public relations on the grounds that they are carried out under the umbrella of an organization.

Second, the 'organizational dimension' of activist public relations includes examples of organizational/corporate activism. Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020) cited examples of organizational activism such as IBM's promise of recruiting two thousand veterans and Starbucks' promise of recruiting ten thousand refugees in 2017; Walmart's working

with suppliers that reduce packaging waste, Aldi's working with suppliers using 100% recyclable materials; Aerie and Target's use of disabled models in their advertisements; companies like TomboyX and Fluide Beauty's selling gender-neutral products; Dick's Sporting Goods' stopping selling guns after a shooting at a high school in 2018; Netflix's announcement that it would reconsider its investments after Georgia's abortion law was passed; and some companies' allowing their employees to vote in the 2018 US elections. Likewise, Corvellec and Stål (2019) considered the take-back campaigns of seven Swedish brands (H&M, KappAhl, Lindex, Gina Tricot, Indiska, Filippa K and Boomerang) to promote sustainable fashion as examples of corporate activism. According to Corvellec and Stål (2019, p. 8) the reason for defining brands aimed at creating an understanding of sustainable fashion as examples of corporate activism is that these brands engage in activist initiatives aimed at influencing the political, industrial, and commercial agenda for the textile industry.

Activist public relations practices that are not carried out under the umbrella of an organization constitute the 'social dimension' of activist public relations (see Table 1). In this regard, unplanned campaigns by 'ad hoc publics' are the examples of activist public relations. Activists do not need to be organized under the umbrella of an organization for a public relations activity to be defined as 'activist public relations'. Many activist groups, who benefit from the opportunities provided by the Internet, use public relations tactics without being affiliated with any organization. There are also studies that evaluate the communication activities of publics who benefit from the opportunities of social media platforms without being a member of any organization, as a public relations campaign and that connects the Internet activism with public relations (Hon, 2015; Honda, 2016; Akçay, 2020).

#JusticeforTrayvon campaign can be given as an example of the 'social' dimension of activist public relations (Hon, 2015). The elderly, the young, women, men, African Americans, other minorities and many people around the world participated in the "Justice for Trayvon" campaign launched in 2012 after George Zimmerman killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin with the aim to get Zimmerman arrested (Hon, 2015, p. 313). The media visibility of the campaign revealed that publics without official authority or resources can conduct public relations campaigns because the visibility of the campaign was mostly ensured by the efforts of informal, decentralized and leaderless publics (Hon, 2015). In this respect, Hon's study revealed that membership in a formal organization is not necessary for the initiatives and campaigns of activist publics to achieve their goals.

The public relations campaign "It Gets Better Project" (IGBP) launched on YouTube by US journalist Dan Savage and her husband Terry Miller to raise awareness to prevent the increasing suicides of LGBTQ youth in 2010, can also be included in the 'social' dimension of activist public relations. By interviewing the participants of IGBP campaign, Honda (2016, p. 255) stated that organizations' activist stakeholders' use of online communication tactics is ignored in public relations literature. The IGBP campaign asked for LGBTQ individuals to prepare videos for at-risk youth (Honda, 2016, p. 253). According to Honda (2016, p. 271) the success of the campaign resulted from the fact that the campaign was a crowdsourced PR campaign that encouraged participants to shoot their own videos. In this framework, the IGBP campaign can also be included in the 'social' dimension of activist public relations because the campaign was popularized through public participation in the campaign, not through an organization's resources.

Akçay (2020) considered Twitter campaigns for violence against women as public relations campaigns in which the public participated massively. The campaign titled #sendeanlat (2015) launched on Twitter by İdil Elveriş after the murder of Özgecan Aslan, the campaign titled #KıyafetimeKarışma (2017) led by the We Will End Femicide Platform after the increase in sexist attacks on women's lifestyles, and the campaign #ŞuleÇetİçinAdalet (2018) launched on Twitter by her friends after her murder are the campaigns where women organized on Twitter and on other social media platforms. Thus, those campaigns became massive and fulfilled their aims with the participation of activist publics. Therefore, it is now possible to talk about publics who become pressure groups and co-creators of the meaning created in communication campaigns, instead of defined public categories that are affected by and affect the decisions of an organization (Akçay, 2020, p. 290-291). The above-mentioned examples (Hon, 2015; Honda, 2016; Akçay, 2020) can be included in the 'social dimension' of activist public relations, as they are examples of public relations carried out by the publics without being affiliated with an organization.

The 'social' dimension of activist public relations includes not only the communication activities of public groups but also intellectuals and public figures. Bisbe et al. (2019, p. 1) stated that the history of public relations should be reconsidered as "a specific historical form of expression", Ancient Greek Comedies can be defined as the first examples of mass communication and the ancient Greek poet Aristophanes' plays can be defined as the origin of dissent public relations; and thus, Aristophanes can be defined as the first public relations practitioner. The fact that Aristophanes was an

intellectual concerned with the public affairs of Athens and criticizing the political power, and the literary tools he used in his plays such as the use of metaphors, animal representations, parabasis, reveals the activist aspect of Aristophanes' plays (Bisbe et al., 2019, p. 2). Bisbe et al. (2019, p. 2) stated that when dissent public relations are defined as ideas promoted by intellectuals, Aristophanes' promotion of his ideas can be an example of dissent public relations. Likewise, Brown (2003) argued that St. Paul was the first public relations practitioner in history. By stating that St. Paul was "one of the most influential communicators in history", Brown (2003, p. 232) argued that St. Paul performed all the roles such as "writer-technician, liaison, manager and strategist" that are usually assigned to modern public relations practitioner.

Claiming that not only organizations but also publics use public relations strategies for activist purposes means developing an alternative to the dominant literature's definition of activist publics as groups that need to be managed. So much so that Demetrious (as cited in Toledano, 2016, p. 283) criticized the efforts of corporate public relations to manage and control activists and underlines the necessity of activist voices for democracy and the legitimacy of activists. Similarly, Holtzhausen (2000, p. 100) stated that although activists are seen as the "enemy" for organizations and governments, activists are "the real voices of democracy." This approach is also compatible with the ideas that public relations and activism should not be defined as "antagonist" as the dominant literature assumes (Ciszek, 2015).

In this context, this study revealed that the claim- that only NGOs and companies through organizational activism use activist public relations- is not sufficient to understand the dimensions of activist public relations. The study also suggested that activist public relations can be examined in two dimensions as 'organizational' and 'social', based on studies showing that 'ad hoc publics' and public figures also use public relations tactics. Although this categorization aims to categorize and systematize the dimensions and types of activist public relations, it can also be considered as an attempt to include activist initiatives in the public relations literature and to establish the link between public relations and society. In other words, placing activist initiatives in the public relations literature also contributes to the understanding of public relations at the social level (Thompson, 2016).

The study shares the claims that not only activist organizations but also activist publics/ 'ad hoc publics', even if they are not a member of an organization, use public

relations tactics for activist purposes. In line with the alternative approach challenging the conceptualization of activist publics as 'obstacles' to the success of organizations, the study argues that activist public relations should not be limited to organizational examples. In this framework, it is believed that the study will contribute to the field in establishing the connection of public relations with society by opening the different dimensions of public relations for activist purposes to discussion. Connecting public relations practice with society is possible only with the proliferation of examples where public relations tactics and strategies are used by the public. In this respect, it is thought that the study will guide studies that will be based on activist public relations in terms of showing that activist public relations is not only carried out by organizations ('organizational' dimension) but can also be used by 'ad hoc publics' or individuals that are not members of any organization ('social' dimension).

Endnotes

[1]I borrowed the term "ad hoc publics" from Bruns & Burgess' study (2011) to refer publics who are not affiliated to any organization but organize and mobilize to raise the political, cultural and social topics in social media platforms.

[2]Muckraking can be defined as scandal reporting or investigative journalism (Aktaş Yamanoğlu et al., 2013, p. 18).

[3]By examining the potential of employees in the organization to be activist publics, McCown (2007, p. 63) revealed that employees can create activist publics for organizations, make their voices heard and use activist communication strategies. Employees, who are "internal activists", can also use media to explain their problems, organize to convey demands, cooperate with other employees, spread gossip, put pressure on the organization (McCown, 2007, p. 64).

References

Akçay, E. (2020). *Halkla ilişkilere toplumsal yaklaşım: kadına yönelik şiddet karşıtı dijital kampanyalar üzerine bir inceleme*. [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation]. Ankara University.

Aktaş Yamanoğlu, M., Gençtürk Hızal, G. S., & Özdemir, B. P. (2013). *Türkiye'de halkla ilişkiler tarihi: kurumsallaşma yılları 1960-1980*. De Ki

Allagui, I. (2017). Towards organisational activism in the UAE: a case study approach. *Public Relations Review, 43*(1), 258-266. 10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.12.007

Bernays, E. L. (1928). *Propaganda*. Horace Liveright.

Bhagwat, Y., Warren, N. L., Beck, J. T. & Watson IV, G. F. (2020). Corporate sociopolitical activism and firm value. *Journal of Marketing*, 84(5), 1-21. 10.1177/0022242920937000

Bisbe, M., Molner, E., & Jiménez, M. (2019). Public intellectuals, political satire and the birth of activist public relations: The case of Attic Comedy. *Public Relations Review*, 45(5), 1-6. 10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.05.011

Brown, R. E. (2003). St. Paul as a public relations practitioner: a metatheoretical speculation on messianic communication and symmetry. *Public Relations Review*, 229-240. 10.1016/S0363-8111(03)00024-9

Bruns, A., & Burgess, J. (2011). The use of Twitter hashtags in the formation of ad hoc Publics (Pp. 25-27). Retrieved from http://eprints.qut.edu.au/46515/1/The_Use_of_Twitter_Hashtags_in_the_Formation_o f_ Ad_Hoc_Publics_(final).pdf

Byerly, C. M. (1993). Toward a comprehensive history of public relations. *Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication,* (pp. 2-23).

Ciszek, E. L. (2015). Review Bridging the gap: mapping the relationship between activism and public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 20(4), 447-455. 10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.05.016

Ciszek, E., Mocarski, R., Price, S., & Almeida, E. (2021). Discursive stickiness: Affective institutional texts and activist resistance. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 10(3), 295-310. 10.1177/2046147X211008388

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(3), 347-353. 10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.11.010

Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2014). *It's not just PR: public relations in society*. Wiley- Blackwell.

Corvellec, H., & Stål, H. I. (2019). Qualification as corporate activism: How Swedish apparel retailers attach circular fashion qualities to take-back systems. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 35(3), 1-9. 10.1016/j. scaman.2019.03.002

Demetrious, K. (2022). Deep canvassing: Persuasion, ethics, democracy and activist public relations. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 11 (3), 361-377. 10.1177/2046147X211033838

Dozier, D. M., & Lauzen, M. M. (2000). Liberating the intellectual domain from the practice: public relations, activism, and the role of the scholar. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(1), 3-22. 10.1207/ S1532754XJPRR1201_2

Eilert, M., & Nappier Cherup, A. (2020). The activist company: examining a company's pursuit of societal change through corporate activism using an institutional theoretical lens. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39(1), 461-76. 10.1177/0743915620947408

Grunig, J. E. (1989). Sierra Club Study shows who become activists. *Public Relations Review*, 15(3), 3-24. 10.1016/ S0363-8111(89)80001-3

Grunig, J. E. (2005). İletişim, halkla ilişkiler ve etkin örgütler: Kitaba genel bir bakış. J. E. Grunig (Ed.) & E. Özsayar (Trans.). *Halkla İlişkiler ve İletişim Yönetiminde Mükemmellik* (pp. 11-40). Rota Yayınları.

Grunig, L. A. (2005). Eylemcilik: örgütlerin etkinliğini nasıl sınırlıyor ve mükemmel halkla ilişkiler departmanları nasıl karşılık vermeli? J. E. Grunig, (Ed.) & E. Özsayar (Trans.). *Halkla İlişkiler ve İletişim Yönetiminde Mükemmellik* (pp. 527-556). Rota Yayınları.

Gülal Şahin, E. (2021). Dijitalleşme çağında aktivist halkla ilişkiler: uluslararası literatür üzerine bir analiz. *International Peer-Reviewed Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 4 (2): 108-138. 10.33464/mediaj.1004598

Heath, R. L., & Waymer, D. (2009). Activist public relations and the paradox of the positive: a case study of Frederick Douglass' "Fourth of July Address". R. L. Heath, E. L. Toth & D. Waymer (Eds.), *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations II* (pp. 195-215). Routledge.

Holtzhausen, D. R. (2000). Postmodern values in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(1), 93-114. 10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1201_6

Holtzhausen, D. R., & Voto, R. (2002). Resistance from the margins: the postmodern public relations practitioner as organizational activist. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 14(1), 57-84. 10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1401_3

Hon, L. (2015). Digital social advocacy in the Justice for Trayvon Campaign. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 27(4), 299-321. 10.1080/1062726X.2015.1027771

Honda, L. P. (2016). Motivations for activists' participation in the 'It Gets Better Project'. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 5(3), 253-276. 10.1177/2046147X15625710

Karaaslan Şanlı, H. & Bozkurt, E. (2022). Aktivizm ve halkla ilişkiler üzerine çarpışan paradigmalar: anti-aktivist söylemden aktivist halkla ilişkilere uzanan yolun haritası. *Ankara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 13 (1), 63-77. 10.33537/sobild.2022.13.1.6

Klein, N. (2000). *No logo.* Flamingo.

Ledingham, J. A. (2009). Genel bir halkla ilişkiler teorisi olarak ilişki yönetimini açımlamak. F. Keskin, & B. P. Özdemir (Eds.), *Halkla İlişkiler Üzerine: Disiplinlerarası Bir Alanın Yönelimleri* (pp. 117-140). Dipnot.

L'Etang, J. (2016). Public relations, activism and social movements: Critical perspectives. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 5(3), 207-211. 10.1177/2046147X16675665

McCown, N. (2007). The role of public relations with internal activists. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 19(1), 47-68. 10.1080/10627260709336595

McQueen, D. (2015). CSR and new battle lines in online PR war: a case study of the energy sector and its discontents. A. Adi, G. Grigore, & D. Crowther (Eds.), *Corporate Social Responsibility in the Digital Age: Developments in Corporate Governance and Responsibility* (volume 7) (pp. 99-125). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Moloney, K., McQueen, D., Surowiec, P., & Yaxley, H. (2013). Dissent and protest public relations. Dissent and Public Relations Seminar Series. Public Relations Research Group, The Media School, Bournemouth University.

Mummery, J. & Rodan, D. (2019). Becoming activist: the mediation of consumers in Animals Australia's Make It Possible campaign. *Media International Australia*, 172(1),48-60. 10.1177/1329878X19853077

Oliver, C. (1991). Strategic responses to institutional processes. *The Academy of Management Review*, 16(1), 145-179.

Özdemir, B. P., & Aktaş Yamanoğlu, M. (2010). Türkiye'deki sivil toplum kuruluşları web sitelerinin diyalojik iletişim kapasiteleri üzerine bir inceleme. *Ankyra: Ankara Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 1(2), 3-36. 10.1501/sbeder_0000000018

Pasirayi, S., Fennell, P. & Follmer, K. B. (2022). #Activism: Investor reactions to corporate sociopolitical activism. *Business & Society*, 1-41.10.1177/00076503221110457

Reyes, C. (2018). Spokesperson is a four-letter word: Public relations and power in Occupy New York. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 7(3), 243- 259. 10.1177/2046147X18796532

Sancar, G. A. (2017). Aktivist halkla ilişkiler bağlamında WWF dünya saati kampanya örneği. *Erciyes İletişim Dergisi "akademia"*, 5(1), 2-18. 10.17680/erciyesakademia.291883

Sanchez, J., Pintado, T. & López-Aza, C. (2022). Companies taking a stand: the effect of corporate activism on Wall Street. *Global Business Review*, 1-22. 10.1177/09721509221130151

Sejrup, J. (2014). Awakening the sufferers: Reflections on public relations, activism, and subalternity in postcolonial controversies between Taiwan and Japan. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 3(1), 51-68. 10.1177/2046147X13519637

Sen, S. (2022). Organizational activism undertaken and its ramifications faced by public relations practitioners, examined through the lens of postmodernism. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 1-23. 10.1177/2046147X211071032

Smith, M. F. (2013). Activism. R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* (pp. 6-8). Sage Publications.

Smith, M. F., & Ferguson, D. P. (2001). Activism. R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 291-300). Sage Publications.

Stokes, A. Q., & Rubin, D. (2010). Activism and the limits of symmetry: the public relations battle between Colorado GASP and Philip Morris. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22(1), 26-48. 10.1080/10627260903150268

Thompson, G. (2016). Towards a theory of rent-seeking in activist public relations. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 5(3), 213-231. 10.1177/2046147X16644005

Toledano, M. (2016). Advocating for reconciliation: public relations, activism, advocacy and dialogue. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 5(3), 277-294. 10.1177/2046147X16666595

Vos, T. P. (2011). Explaining the origins of public relations: logics of historical explanation. *Journal of Public Relations Research,* 23(2), 119-140. 10.1080/1062726X.2010.504793

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.

Williams, D. K., Archer, C. J. & O'Mahony, L. (2022). Calm the farm or incite a riot? Animal activists and the news media: A public relations case study in agenda-setting and framing. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 11(3), 403-425. 10.1177/2046147X211055192

Wolf, K. (2019). 'PRi special edition: The intersections between public relations and neoliberalism'- The road to nowhere: Re-examining activists' role in civil societies. *Public Relations Inquiry,* 8 (2), *167-188.* 10.1177/2046147X19846578

Yıldırım Becerikli, S. (2005). *Uluslararası halkla ilişkiler*. Nobel.

Yıldırım Becerikli, S. (2008). *Ve halkla ilişkiler: Şeytanın avukatlığından arabuluculuğa; bir disiplinin eleştirel analizi*. Karınca.