Rethinking Public Relations: Persuasion, Democracy and Society (3rd edition)

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The third edition of *Rethinking Public Relations: Persuasion, Democracy, and Society* continues its predecessors in evaluating the field of public relations in the context of its role and function in society. While the prior editions, namely, *Rethinking Public Relations: The Spin and the Substance* (2000) and *Rethinking Public Relations: PR Propaganda and Democracy* (2006) were authored by Kevin Maloney, this new edition welcomes Conor McGrath as co-author.

Also new for this edition is a chapter on digital and social media and improved content on corporate social responsibility (CSR), sponsorships, and community relations. Most importantly, the authors have analyzed not just the structural power of PR in society, but also the rhetorical power of PR. Beginning with the definition of public relations and idealization in Chapter 1, through the conclusion in Chapter 9, the authors argue that the role of PR in society should be advocacy and counter-advocacy rather than what they propose are the idealized roles of relationship building and reputation management.

Chapter 1 Paradoxes, Paradigms and Pillars

In this chapter, the authors discuss the inadequacies of definitions

of PR from its stated or intended purpose as a company's conscience, to the way the industry presents itself as a management function that uses strategic communication to build and maintain relationships and reputation. Most importantly, they highlight the lack of 'persuasion' as a key aspect of PR in these definitions and conceptualizations.

The chapter argues that scholars must look beyond the four models of PR (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to examine PR's role and effect on the political economy, civil society and the media, an effect that is generated through propaganda, persuasion, and influence.

Chapter 2 PR: Dignified, Efficient, Self-delusional?

In the second chapter, the authors argue that PR has not clearly articulated its social purpose. They critically examine PR as strategic communication and also as a management function and then highlight inadequacies found when conceptualizing PR's role as relationship and reputation based. They suggest that PR should reclaim persuasion and influence as cornerstones of practice because these better reflect the realities of the industry. Finally, they review PR's historical links to propaganda and claim that PR is, in fact, weak propaganda because of its need to persuade audiences through argumentation and messaging.

Chapter 3 Rhetoric, Framing and PR Messaging

The third chapter builds on preceding chapters by focusing on persuasive messaging and its role in PR communication. They advance the notion that PR, through skillful messaging, can aid both the powerful and those in less advantageous positions in society. They suggest that because PR information is rarely neutral, instead designed to be persuasive, to influence public opinion and behavior, the status of PR should be elevated to that of other elite groups such as politicians, big business, and journalists, that transform society. As they note "All PR is fundamentally about advocacy, about advancing a particular agenda or interest" (Maloney & McGrath, 2020," Framing," para. 3).

The chapter provides several subsections, the first of which discusses a rhetorical perspective of PR. The authors suggest that PR must be considered as rhetoric as it will most always fall under public scrutiny in a marketplace of differing ideas and points-of-view and must be persuasive to make itself seen and heard. In this section, the authors make a point to warn that rhetoric can be dangerous when it is used to promote ideas that are not based on fact or truth. Additional subsections identify the use of framing and persuasive messaging as tools for developing strong persuasive content and the role of PR in a pluralistic liberal democracy.

Chapter 4 Stakeholders and Society

As indicated in its title, the fourth chapter discusses the use of 'publics' versus 'stakeholders' in public relations and whether and how the distinction matters. The authors explore the rise of the stakeholder concept from the management perspective of stakeholder theory, wherein stakeholders are considered as elements of risk that can positively or negatively affect an organization's ability to achieve its goals. They argue that in PR, stakeholders are generally perceived as allies and insufficient attention is applied to considering stakeholders as neutrals or opponents. To that end, the chapter discusses various ways in which stakeholders can be categorized for targeted PR communication, including ranking by legitimacy, urgency, and power, or by the power/interest matrix, which considers the extent to which stakeholders have power over the organization's ability to achieve its goals and the extent to which they are interested in the issue. The takeaway is that regardless of categorization, stakeholders are important to PR because they provide the recipient carefully constructed and targeted messaging.

Chapter 4 also discusses the roles of sponsorship, community relations, and corporate social responsibility as they relate to specialized groups of stakeholders and the pros, cons, and necessity for organizations to engage in these types of activities.

Chapter 5 Journalism and PR – Conflict, Complicity, Capitulation

The fifth chapter examines the relationship between journalism and public relations. It considers whether PR and journalism are sufficiently adversarial since journalists should critically and objectively evaluate PR communication, which is primarily one-sided advocacy and therefore likely lacking in objectivity. Such an 'adversarial' relationship is necessary for the retention of the third-party effect provided by the media and it is also needed to protect the public from the potentially negative effects of PR propaganda.

According to the authors, the 'PR-isation' and capitulation of the media to PR agendas has weakened the value of the third-party effect. As a result, people are less likely to trust the media, even when the stories are genuine and credible, and are less likely to absorb and be influenced by PR messaging. Thus, the authors suggest that journalism and PR should operate in two inter-connected but distinct communication systems. To do so, they argue PR must be re-conceptualized as a media system, much as journalism and advertising are conceptualized as media systems. Such systems have clear characteristics, which in the case of PR, would be to persuade for competitive advantage and self-interest, while conversely, journalism should be characterized by scrutiny of interest and objectivity.

Chapter 6 Digital Evolution or Revolution?

In this chapter, the authors consider the opportunities and pitfalls of communicating through digital and social media (DSM) in business and politics. Among the opportunities offered by DSM are the potential for groups and organizations of any size to disseminate messages globally and inexpensively, and to build virtual relationships with publics by communicating with them rather than at them. In a world where we are all content creators, positive consumer experiences, expressed through ratings, images, and commentary by publics can also aid in brand promotion and credibility. Conversely, negative commentary can harm

reputation and credibility. Moreover, the practicality and expense of responding to all those who comment or engage with an organization through DSM are addressed as are the role of influencers, DSM's potential effect on crisis communication, and the positive and negative of DSM in political communication. Finally, the authors argue that the full potential of DSM is not being utilized by groups and organizations.

Chapter 7 PR, Politics and Democracy

This chapter critically examines the role of PR in politics and democracy. The authors argue that PR propaganda has always been a part of politics and as media becomes increasingly saturated with competing messages, there has been an increased need for PR to maximize electoral support. However, they caution that there is a danger that power may move from the politicians to those that present the messages (i.e., PR) and suggest a beneficial co-existence to aid democracy. The role of PR propaganda in this beneficial co-existence is to provide a plurality of voices and messages, presumably for organizations and groups of all sizes, in the marketplace of ideas thereby providing the plurality that is key to representative democracy.

Chapter 8 Lobbying and Public Affairs

The content of this chapter on lobbying, follows logically from Chapter 7, which focused on political communication. In this chapter, the authors examine the often controversial PR propaganda associated with lobbying. Yet, they point out that lobbying is a fairly cost-effective means for under-represented groups and for organizations of all sizes to insert a voice into societal debate. They suggest that lobbying is another form of rhetorical communication and that 'public affairs' is simply another term for lobbying.

They posit that PR's role is that of the 'voice' of policy pluralism. Further, that PR is conceptualized and planned internally but that it is executed externally on behalf of all manner of organizations from

businesses to cause groups, to trade and industry associations, all of whom seek to influence policy decisions that will advance their own self-interests. They suggest that stakeholder theory and CSR have made PR more complex and more necessary as organizations strive to produce the most persuasive voice to promote or defend their interests in the competing marketplace of such interests.

As a result, there is a need for the advocacy and counter-advocacy provided by PR. Competing voices provide stakeholders with the opportunity to hear many persuasive messages and determine what they believe to be the truth.

Chapter 9 Conclusion

In this chapter, the authors tie together their argument that the role of PR in society should be advocacy and counter-advocacy. While respectful of the traditional cornerstones of PR – mutual understanding, strategic communication, relationships and reputation management – the authors argue that PR is weak propaganda and its role is persuasive communication.

The sum of these chapters provides a thoughtful and critical evaluation of PR's function and role in society. The book is a good text for those interested in considering PR outside the status quo – who acknowledge and appreciate current models and theories but who are also willing to look at the role of PR from a different perspective. The text meticulously cites and references major contributions to PR theory, providing summary information and critical evaluation of those contributions. Examples from both the United Kingdom and United States are woven into the text to provide examples of topics of discussion.

Overall, the book is appropriate as a supplementary text for undergraduate and graduate classes in PR, persuasion, public opinion, propaganda, business, or PR theory. It provides a unique voice in conceptualization of PR, taking readers outside the established paradigms

and lending support to growing areas of PR research in advocacy and

public interest communication.

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