

*BOOK REVIEW*

**Discovering Public Relations: An Introduction to  
Creative and Strategic Practices**

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Karen Freberg (2021) wrote, “Ultimately, to make change happen in the field, you have to do it yourself. The time is now for the field to finally move forward in a new and innovative direction” (p. xxi). Freberg delivers on her promise for an invigorating PR textbook that prepares students for the industry now—and instructs them about how to be trailblazers in their own right as they carry the discipline into the future.

**Message from a Maverick**

The preface would be more aptly titled “Message From a Maverick” as Karen Freberg takes the stage to denounce PR textbooks (as outdated); the chasm between the PR classroom and the industry; and the cannibalization of PR by disciplines that are quick to teach social media strategy and digital storytelling, such as English; and the PR industry for its stagnation. She rebukes bias based on academic pedigree and particular research agendas in public relations. (I’m interpreting the latter item refers to the former stigma against research in public relations education).

### **A Textbook Unicorn**

Freberg's book is rich with coverage in areas that update the traditional textbook, such as a contemporary discussion of diversity and inclusion, a full chapter on business acumen, a chapter about client and personal branding, and a deep dive into creative content and content marketing. Freberg plays to her considerable strengths in these areas and fills the pages with eye-catching social media screenshots, diagrams, and industry examples. Each chapter is enhanced by an infographic, game changer highlight, case study, summary, relevance to the APR exam (via listed areas the chapter covers), and key terms.

Ancillary materials include sample syllabi, discussion questions, activities, slides, and test bank questions. Textbook adopters can also gain access to a private Facebook group, where instructors can ask questions and invite the author to chat with their classes. The Facebook group has helpful resources, including a guide to which areas of the book will help students review for portions of the Certificate in Principles of Public Relations exam.

### **Small Shortcomings**

Although the book has considerable strengths, there are areas for improvement in the next edition. This is not the only recent textbook in which I have noticed the types of problems I address here, which could be endemic of a larger issue in the review process of recent PR textbooks.

***Moral relativism.*** I paused when reading the glib treatment of global ethics: "What is considered unprofessional in one country may be perfectly okay in another" (p. 304). Missing from this point was the follow-up that just because a practice is permissible by members of another country does not mean that it is moral. The textbook seems to greenlight the "do as the Romans do" philosophy, which means that instructors using this textbook should add a unit on moral relativism to their lecture. Historic legends, such as Leon Sullivan, have demonstrated

the ability to stand for human rights and make long-term gains not only for a single company and industry but also for humanity. To counterbalance the textbook, I simultaneously required my students to read the position papers from the PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (n.d.).

***Strawman argument.*** In the opening chapter, Freberg creates what appears to be a strawman argument about outmoded academic definitions of public relations; however, the academic textbook definitions she uses are old. Cutlip and Center's 1971 definition is used, rather than the most recent one: "Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Broom & Sha, 2013, p. 5). She juxtaposes the academic definition with PRSA's definition, which explains that PR is "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (Public Relations Society of America, 2021). The positioning continues the rift between academe and the industry that Freberg sets up in the preface, which does not seem like a productive way to get students excited about the rest of their academic education in PR. If the author sticks with the agitative approach, however, the strawman argument can be avoided by using the most recent definition of Cutlip and Center, found in Broom and Sha (2013).

***Inaccurate literature.*** Close attention is needed to how academic literature is represented. For example, the statement, "Grunig and Repper (1992) defined stakeholders as publics, implying they are a broader group comprised of anyone an organization needs to be aware of for its well-being" (Freberg, 2021, p. 5). J. E. Grunig distinguished between publics and stakeholders, "Often the terms stakeholder and public are used synonymously. There is a subtle difference, however, that helps to understand strategic planning of public relations. ... Only stakeholders who are or become aware and active can be described as publics" (Grunig

& Repper, 1992, p. 125). Students, of course, will not be disadvantaged by this lack of precision; however, it is a change that should be made to the next edition.

***Muddled PR models.*** The infographic of the PR models represented the distinction between asymmetrical and symmetrical communication in a muddled way. According to the infographic, “The two-way asymmetrical model is focused on two-way communication, allowing both parties to have a chance to have a conversation, though one has more power than the other. [Symmetrical communication] ... is very similar, except that the symmetrical model focuses on equal power between the parties in conversation” (p. 40). Additionally, in the chapter, Freberg (2021) wrote, “Two-way asymmetrical communication focuses on providing a balanced conversation, but there is still one party that is overseeing the power within the conversation” (p. 23). By comparison, J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) wrote, “Asymmetrical communication is unbalanced. It leaves the organization as is and tries to change the public” (p. 289). The notion of “two-way” comes in through the use of research to persuade. J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) described symmetrical communication by stating, “Unlike the two-way asymmetrical model, however, it uses research to facilitate understanding and communication rather than to identify messages most likely to motivate or persuade publics” (p. 289).

The infographic suggests that a conversation with unequal power is the distinction; however, asymmetrical communication does not require a conversation. Asymmetrical communication simply requires research, which undergraduates are unlikely to view as the same as a conversation. Furthermore, the symmetrical definition in the infographic should be centered on mutual understanding and benefit rather than how much power the parties have in the relationship.

***Theoretical limitation.*** Although this is the most up-to-date

textbook in PR I have read, more can be done to update the inclusion of theory, and additional precision would be useful in how theory is described. Freberg (2021) wrote, “Grunig’s situational theory of publics helps us figure out what will motivate our audiences to listen act and engage in a conversation with us and our clients” (p. 182). While technically true—we can make an educated guess about how clients might engage in a conversation based on the theory—the theory specifically predicts only information processing and information seeking. However, the updated extension of the theory, the situational theory of problem solving, can be used to predict conversation, among other valuable outcomes, and it would be a better theory to explain when making an argument for the prediction of conversations (see Kim & Grunig, 2011).

**Nomenclature.** The term controlling mutuality is used, which is the first time I’ve heard that form of the term, and the term is repeated in the test bank. The term is simply control mutuality but rewriting it as “mutual control” for ease of understanding would be a fine alternative (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

### **Conclusion**

“Discovering Public Relations” represents a substantial advancement in public relations education, and I am grateful to Freberg (2021) and the people with whom she worked for producing such an engaging, useful book for the Principles of Public Relations course.

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