

BOOK REVIEW

The Future of Feminism in Public Relations and Strategic Communication

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The Future of Feminism in Public Relation and Strategic Communication

Authors: Linda Aldoory and Elizabeth Toth
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In The Future of Feminism in Public Relations and Strategic Communication, Aldoory and Toth present a comprehensive review of public relations literature that has addressed feminism, gender, race, LGBTQ, and marginalized groups in the field of public relations and organized that work into a socio-ecological model. The final model presented in the book demonstrates how research and practice in public relations have been influenced at the practitioner level, organizational level, professional level, media level, and ideological level. The book also provides an analysis and critique of the multiple factors that have constituted meaning about women, people of color, and LGBTQ practitioners and its influence on research and practice in public relations. Finally, the authors opened up a dialogue with scholars and practitioners (see Chapter 11), which informed the final model presented in the book. The content presented in this book is complex, but Aldoory and Toth are skilled at making these concepts accessible, organized, and easy to follow. The book's scope is rather broad, attempting to review and organize an entire field of literature. Still, the authors expertly present the content in a

way that makes this a practical resource for scholars at all levels.

Content and Scope

The first section sets the stage for the research that is to come later in the book. In Chapter 1, Aldoory and Toth take time to define socio-ecological models and provide examples of how such models have been used, such as Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy of influences model that illustrates the multiple influences that shape media content. The authors then sharpen their focus on applying a socio-ecological model to public relations and present the first iteration of their model, which becomes the organizing structure for the remainder of the book. Chapter 2, aptly titled "The Backstory," is beneficial to the book, especially if the reader is new to feminism and the academic study of public relations. The authors define public relations from various perspectives, including functional structuralist, rhetorical and critical, and postmodern. Aldoory and Toth then take to task the job of presenting the varying conceptualizations and approaches to feminism, reviewing feminist research, and discussing feminism communication theory. The chapter concludes with a section on intersectionality, presenting it as a method for considering "the multiplicative effects of identities and oppressions" (p. 31).

Sections two through five are the heart and soul of the book where the authors start broadly, at the ideological level of the model, and work their way through the remaining levels of the proposed model, concluding with the practitioner level. Throughout the chapters in these sections, the authors take care to define key concepts, explain why they placed particular concepts in certain parts of the model, and present relevant research. For example, Chapter 3 focuses on the ideological level of the model and includes macro-level discussions of hegemony, capitalism, Marxism, classism, critical race theory, racism, feminism, sexism,

heteronormativity, and homophobia. These high-level discussions about broader ideals are always brought back to how they are relevant to public relations. This structure allows Aldoory and Toth to provide the reader with a primer on the higher-level ideologies and return them to a public relations emphasis while presenting the reader with an overview of extant literature in these areas. Several chapters within this section include a case study to illustrate the main ideas presented in the chapter. For example, Chapter 9 consists of a case study, “The Feminist Fallacy” at the Practitioner Level, which the authors describe as “a discouraging yet cautionary case example of how feminism can be co-opted and designed to be against women’s better selves. This case shows the invisibility of class, education, race, and gender influences while also assuming a success story for women” (p. 151).

Section six concludes the book with two chapters that includes a summary and a call to action, respectively. Chapter 11 was an interesting and thought-provoking read as Aldoory and Toth brought together women from different backgrounds and countries to discuss feminism, the challenges for women and people of color in public relations, and the proposed socio-ecological model. The chapter is devoted to highlights from a two-day discussion in which participants spoke candidly about issues like racism, xenophobia, misogyny, and bias in research. The scholars also weighed in on the socio-ecological model and suggested adjustments to the model so that the professional and organizational levels were moved, arguing that the organizational level has a more direct influence on the practitioner level than the professional level. Chapter 12 accounts for the authors’ changes to the model after receiving feedback from their peers. The book ends with a call to action, where Aldoory and Toth acknowledge this is not a definitive work but rather a call for continued professional and scholarly discourse that deepens an

understanding of the problems of racism, sexism, and homophobia in public relations. The model here is new and has not been used before, but we hope it will become a helpful tool for future research. (p. 195)

Contribution to PR Education

Through a comprehensive overview of the extant literature on public relations and feminism and a model that serves as an organizing structure, Aldoory and Toth provide the reader with an introductory course on the state of feminist research in public relations and identify gaps in the research. Their book contributes to PR education by demonstrating the need for continued scholarly work that is more comprehensive and includes the experiences of women, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and other marginalized groups not represented in the current body of research. They challenge scholars to critique the structures that uphold patriarchal values, limit change, and prohibit social justice.

Audience

The Future of Feminism in Public Relations and Strategic Communication is an essential read especially for the new scholar interested in studying feminism, public relations, and strategic communication. The book's structure lends itself well to be used as a text in a graduate seminar on public relations or feminism or as a researcher's guide to previous scholarship. The book covers a variety of issues and perspectives on public relations and serves as an instruction manual for interpreting such problems and perspectives with a critical lens. The accessibility of the writing in this book would make it a practical addition to a graduate-level course.

Critique

In their discussion of intersectionality (Chapter 2), Aldoory and Toth

write, “We believe in the criterion of reflexivity and promote it among our students and in our paper. Thus, for transparency and analysis purposes, we describe below some of our reflexive thoughts about our own feminism and how we came to be feminists” (p. 33). In that same spirit, I would like to disclose that, as a researcher, my studies are situated in the social scientific, empirical tradition, and I frequently seek opportunities to research with co-authors who specialize in qualitative methods. I find value using a mixed methods approach to research. I disclose this about myself because my one critique of this book is that as a feminist, I want to do research that answers the call put forth by Aldoory and Toth in the book, but there is limited guidance in how to do that from different research traditions. All scholars, including those of us whose work is more empirical, would benefit from the arguments made in this book about the need for more research to examine gender, class, race, and sexual orientation and should consider how to make our research methods more inclusive. Doing so would help us create a richer understanding of the public relations discipline.

Conclusion

Aldoory and Toth took on the challenge to review and organize an entire body of literature in one book, and started a conversation on where the field should go next. My critique of *The Future of Feminism in Public Relations and Strategic Communication* came from a place of being inspired to want to do more to promote social justice and diversity, equity, and inclusion in public relations scholarship. But I also acknowledge that one book can't be all things to all people. What makes this a compelling book is that it inspires with facts and information, and it shows the reader where we are in the field and how far we still have to go to create a body of knowledge that accounts for the experiences of people from varied backgrounds.

References

Shoemaker, P., & Reese, S. D. (1996). *Mediating the message: Theories of influences on mass media content* (2nd ed.). Longman.