

Book Review

Review of *It's Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society*

Sue Curry Jansen

Muhlenberg College, Allentown, PA

It's Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society By W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay Wiley-Blackwell, 2007, \$26.95 (soft), 144 pp.

The stale joke, “No one needs PR more than the PR industry,” is the point of departure for Coombs and Holladay’s book. As public relations educators, they take on the daunting challenge of rescuing their field from its history, current reputation, and “corporate-centric” associations. Their plan of attack involves (a) critiquing critics of public relations; (b) mobilizing an “academic” defense of public relations by examining its ethical potential; (c) positing an alternative to the corporate-centric history of public relations; (d) embracing a “marketplace of ideas” approach to the social influences of public relations; and (e) briefly considering the global effects of public relations. Coombs and Holladay seek to complicate thinking about public relations by focusing on two areas that are underdeveloped in the literature on public relations: the role power plays in public relations and the use of public relations by noncorporate entities.

Coombs and Holladay contend that media portrayals of public relations, which equate it with “spin, stonewalling, distortion, manipulation, or lying” (p. 1), contribute mightily to PR’s negative image; however, they devote their most extensive critiques to what they categorize as “popular press books”

on public relations. Even trade books that defend public relations are faulted because they reduce public relations to publicity; but their primary targets are “popular press attacks on public relations,” specifically Stuart Ewen’s (1996) *PR! A Social History of Spin* (1996) and John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton’s (1995) *Toxic Sludge is Good for You* (1995) and *PR Watch* (PRWatch.org), which expose the “dark side” of public relations. Coombs and Holladay contend that these attacks imply that PR is “inherently evil” and “undemocratic” because Ewen, Stauber, and Rampton maintain that public relations “subverts and weakens the news media” and allows corporations “to deceive and to harm stakeholders.” Ewen is an academic historian; and, despite a colorful style, Stauber and Rampton do conform to academic conventions of argumentation and evidence. Yet, Coombs and Holladay consider their work nonacademic because their books are marketed by “trade” rather than academic publishers. Coombs and Holladay do not engage in refuting the specifics of the critical attacks, but rather present more global counterarguments that reframe public relations within the broader categories of democratic public communications, freedom of expression, and the marketplace of ideas.

Contra the critics, Coombs and Holladay contend that public relations is a necessary constituent of the contemporary global order, and that it possesses an enormous but still largely untapped power to do good. Specifically, they invoke feminist Carol Gilligan’s concept of an “ethics of care” to advocate for a reconceptualization of public relations whereby the public relations professional serves as a mediator between various

“stakeholders” in public issues. Coombs and Holladay emphasize the importance of the roles of listening and dialog in this mediating process, and even reference Habermas’ ideal speech situation as providing a model that public relations professionals should emulate when hearing stakeholders’ claims. They contend that the PR professionals should serve as advocates for the public interest—that they should act as the consciences of organizations—and that they can thereby make positive contributions to society.

The authors do, however, admit the limits of the PR professionals’ influence in organizations. Ethically responsible advice is not likely to be heeded unless it advances, or at least does not adversely affect, the organization’s bottom line. That is, PR can only do good when doing good is profitable; or in the case of nonprofit organizations, when it enhances an organization’s profile in the eyes of prospective donors. Profitability may, however, be calculated indirectly. It may, for example, consist in averting the costs that overt conflict would incur, or contribute to the reservoir of social capital within a social network that an organization can draw upon in the future. The authors argue that there may be stronger external incentives for organizations to exercise social responsibility today because Internet activism makes it increasingly difficult for organizations to conceal their dirty laundry. Nevertheless, Coombs and Holladay acknowledge that “the greatest problem for public relations is the issue of power,” which “public relations has skated round with the skill of a professional dancer.” To speak truth to power is not exercising an ethics of care if doing so is an empty ritual.

Extending the ethics of care to public relations is an innovative stretch. Debate within the academic literature on liberal social justice theory has concluded that the assumptions of the ethics of care and capitalism are mutually exclusive (Cohen, 1986). Historically, the role of PR has been to serve as a “fixer” for capitalism. Edward Bernays (1928) referred to it, without apologies, as propaganda.

In constructing their alternative history of public relations, however, Coombs and Holladay skate past the canons of historiography with abandon. Standard histories of the early 20th century view the development of public relations as a reaction against socialist, social gospel, and populist criticisms of capitalism that gained broad currency through muckraking journalism and books (Raucher, 1968; Tedlow, 1979; Wiebe, 1962). By ignoring chronology, eschewing corporate-centric interpretations, and conflating public relations and public communication, Coombs and Holladay claim muckrakers were the “‘original’ public relations practitioners of the 20th century.” That is, muckrakers pioneered the use of mass media to advance a cause, an approach that corporations would further develop. Coombs and Holladay maintain that “In reality, social activists were practicing public relations before large corporations existed.” Upton Sinclair and Ida Tarbell are not only subsumed under this definition of noncorporate-centric PR, but also the abolitionists, the suffragettes, leaders of the temperance movement, as well as more recent social change advocates including Saul Alinsky, Greenpeace, and Internet activists. Indeed, Carrie Nation is described as practicing “guerrilla PR.” Who, the reviewer must ask, is dancing round the issue of power here? Ends as well as means matter.

Coombs and Holladay invoke the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas to support their contention that public relations is a prosocial force because it contributes to discourse on public issues. They do not unpack the marketplace metaphor or address claims that neoliberalism is privatizing the marketplace of ideas (McChesney & Nichols, 2002) or that corporations now have the power to exercise market censorship over mainstream media. They do, however, cite historical examples that show that society does change (slavery was abolished, women vote); and they see Internet activism as a kind of equalizing force in struggles for social change because it allows social activists, with modest

resources, to challenge the policies and practices of megacorporations such as Wal-Mart.

Coombs and Holladay's exploration of the global effects of public relations briefly explores public diplomacy; however, most of their attention here focuses on private voluntary organizations (PVOs) such as the Rainforest Action Network and the Union of Concerned Scientists, who Coombs and Holladay see as increasingly important stakeholders in international policy-making. They point out that research shows that people trust PVOs more than government and corporations. For this reason, corporations seek to partner with PVOs. Where Stauber and Rampton regard such partnerships as attempts to co-opt and undermine the objectives of PVOs, Coombs and Holladay see them as opportunities for actualizing an ethics of care. Specifically, they maintain that international treaties and human rights agreements such as the UN Millennium Development Goals and Ethical Training Initiative can encourage corporate social responsibility by making it profitable. That is, these kinds of agreements can provide supports (*qua* neoliberal subsidies) that can increase corporate productivity, reduce litigation and production costs, and enhance marketing efforts. However, Coombs and Holladay are not market fundamentalists, they maintain that profits motives are not sufficient; that public relations practitioners must bring a values approach to their practice, which requires "organizations to address expectations [of the PVOs and international agreements] because they are morally right." Coombs and Holladay cite the familiar example of the Body Shop as an exemplar of an ethical business.

I am not persuaded by Coombs and Holladay's approach to history, power, and public communication, or by their technological optimism. Nonetheless in an era in which all advocacy groups, including PVOs, require media plans, wholesale dismissals of public

relations do not only seem unrealistic, but also sanctimonious. Consequently, I applaud the authors' attempt to think imaginatively outside the box. I find it salutary that as PR educators Coombs and Holladay embrace pedagogical models that place ethics at their center and strive to be sensitive to the needs of all stakeholders in public issues. I hope this book will be widely assigned as well as critically interrogated in public relations, media studies, and media literacy courses because it does raise questions that other PR textbooks dance right past.

I will not, however, be giving up my subscription to *PR Watch* any time soon.

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