

Public Relations in Global Cultural Contexts

Multi-Paradigmatic Perspectives

Edited by

Nilanjana Bardhan and
C. Kay Weaver



Communication Series

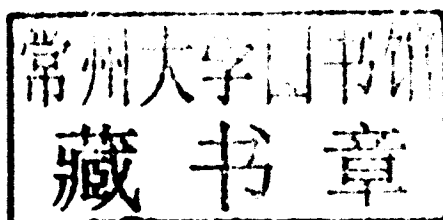
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Public Relations in Global Cultural Contexts

While public relations practice has become increasingly globalized, scholars are still behind in theorizing about the intersections of culture, communication, and power at this level of practice. This volume emphasizes theories and concepts that highlight global interconnectedness through a range of interpretative and critical approaches to understanding the global significance and impacts of public relations.

Providing a critical examination of public relations' contribution to globalization and international power relations, the chapters included here explore alternative paradigms, most notably interpretive and critical perspectives informed by qualitative research. The volume encourages alternative 'ways of knowing' that overcome the shortcomings of positivist epistemologies. The editors include multiple paradigmatic approaches for a more complex understanding of the subject matter, making a valuable contribution toward widening the philosophical scope of public relations scholarship.

This book will serve well as a core text in classes in international public relations, global public relations, and advanced strategic public relations. Students as well as practitioners of public relations will benefit from reading the perspectives included here.

Nilanjana Bardhan is an Associate Professor in the Department of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University – Carbondale, USA. She teaches and conducts research in the areas of public relations (especially in global contexts) and intercultural/international communication. She has practitioner experience in India and in the US, and her scholarship has appeared in a number of edited book collections and journals such as the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Communication Education*, *Mass Communication and Society*, and the *Journal of Health Communication*.

C. Kay Weaver is a Professor in the Department of Management Communication at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. She has taught across the fields of public relations, communication, media, and film studies in the UK and New Zealand. Her research has been published in a number of books and edited collections and in journals such as *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Media, Culture & Society*, *New Media & Society*, and *Feminist Media Studies*.

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Preface

This book brings together essays by public relations scholars geographically located across three continents, and with cultural roots and affiliations in more. These scholars answered our call to put together a volume that would focus on two greatly understudied concepts in public relations scholarship—globalization and culture. No two concepts could be more important for our profession today. While practitioners in the industry have been working daily in global cultural contexts and grappling with the complexities of this experience, scholarship still lags behind in interrogating and theorizing the relationship between globalization and culture as it relates to public relations.

Globalization, in its current form, has blurred many boundaries and neat categories of modernist thought. As a result, it has made the messy concept of culture even messier. In order to present a range of research positions on public relations, globalization, and culture, we decided that including perspectives from public relations scholars working out of different paradigmatic positions would be most useful for our readers. Our contributors, as a collective, emphasize theories and concepts that highlight cultural and global interconnectedness through interpretative, critical/cultural, postmodern, and social scientific approaches. In doing so, they help us better understand how public relations is constituted by and constitutive of global flux. Hence, our readers will encounter various epistemological viewpoints, some of which may be conflicting, but all of which carry the potential for dialogue across paradigms about the role of public relations in a global capacity. It is our hope that students, scholars, and practitioners of public relations will benefit from such a wide range of perspectives.

We emphasize that we do not use the term *global* in the title of this book in a monolithic or homogenizing sense. The discourse of globalization (and culture) is far from fixed and it would be hard to argue “global” public relations is a necessarily definable entity. Therefore, our use of the term *global* is more indicative of the domain of practice; that is, a

domain that is increasingly spanning the globe. We deliberately shied away from prescribing an interpretation for the term so our contributors could be flexible in how they used and theorized it in their chapters.

We would like to thank Linda Bathgate at Routledge for her enthusiasm for our initial proposal, and for her encouragement and support throughout the writing and preparation process. We would also like to thank Katherine Ghezzi for her editorial assistance. Our thanks also go out to Jennings Bryant, James Grunig, and an anonymous reviewer of our proposal for their valuable feedback which helped us improve upon our vision for this book. And of course, this volume would not have been possible without our contributors and their insights. Nilanjana would like to thank colleagues and mentors, in particular Hugh Culbertson at Ohio University and Tee Ford Ahmed at West Virginia State University, who have been instrumental in her growth as a teacher-scholar in the field. Kay would like to thank her colleagues in the Department of Management Communication at the University of Waikato for a decade of support and engaging discussions about public relations practice and scholarship.

Nilanjana Bardhan and C. Kay Weaver

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Introduction

Public Relations in Global Cultural Contexts

Nilanjana Bardhan and C. Kay Weaver

If we are to attempt to understand the world in the new century, we cannot but come to grips with the concept of globalization.

(Appelbaum & Robinson, 2005, p. xi)

Globalization has not only increased the importance of “global” public relations but has also provided the opportunity for introspection and self-critique about the practice and scholarship.

(Sriramesh, 2009a, p. 9)

We hear it everywhere. It is a prominent refrain in the discourse of public relations practitioners and scholars. Public relations has gone global. But what does “global public relations” mean in the life world of our field, and what are the implications of globalization for public relations scholarship and practice? The last two decades have radically changed the way people, organizations, and systems communicate and operate across national and cultural borders. While old ways of theorizing about the functions and sociocultural role of public relations are inadequate for conceptualizing new globalizing realities, they are not completely erased either. In other words, we are at an in-between point in our thinking about these matters. Questions related to globalization cannot be theorized by simply reusing dated frames of thinking, and yet, partly as a consequence of critical reactions against them, these frames have provided the impetus for the emergence of new questions. This book maneuvers through this in-between space in order to stretch our thinking and scholarship around public relations in global cultural contexts in newly productive directions.

As educators and scholars of public relations, we have noted three major gaps in the public relations body of knowledge. First, the phenomenon of globalization has not been addressed in all its complexity and remains under theorized and unpoliticized in the field. Second, the concept of culture also needs to be theorized in much more complex terms

within public relations scholarship, especially in terms of its intersections with globalization. Within the current conditions of transnational flows and processes, culture has become increasingly deterritorialized and cultural identities have become fragmented (Sison, 2009). The meager theorizing on culture that does exist in our scholarship (Sriramesh, 2007) predominantly conceptualizes culture as static, clearly definable, and synonymous with territory. Additionally, the nation-state is still, problematically, conceptualized as the natural container of culture (Berking, 2003). Third, there has been insufficient focus on the range of possible paradigmatic approaches in the study of public relations. The social scientific (modernist) systems functionalist approach still dominates the field. The applied focus of this approach has been important to the profession in terms of promoting and stimulating debate about how public relations is and should be practiced. However, equally important are other approaches that question dominant models and beliefs and offer alternative ways of understanding the functions and effects of public relations practice. For example, there is a need for further inclusion of critical/cultural, interpretive, and postmodern approaches that theorize public relations as playing a significant role in the social construction of reality, and which interrogate how power permeates the processes of public relations in a global (dis)order where inequality is endemic (Shome & Hedge, 2002). The relationships between culture, communication, context, and power (Martin & Nakayama, 2010) in practice (as well as in scholarship) needs to be a key focus if we are to stay intellectually current (McKie, 2001), keep providing suggestions for how to improve practice, and genuinely engage with questions of ethics and social responsibility in public relations in a rapidly globalizing and interconnected world.

The purpose of this book is to address these three gaps. While some public relations scholarship has started exploring the complexities of globalization, the nature and role of culture, identity, and power in public relations (e.g., Curtin & Gaither, 2007), and is questioning the adequacy of only a social scientific functional approach to the field, no single volume exists that specifically brings these three issues under one umbrella. The aim of this book is to begin the work of filling these lacunae.

In the 1990s, public relations scholarship started engaging in paradigm debates. Very simply, a paradigm is the research worldview that scholars subscribe to in order to produce what they consider valid knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 2008; Kuhn, 1996; Mittelman, 2004). While we lean toward the critical paradigm in this book, we have opted for a multiparadigmatic and dialectical stance that is open to all perspectives and values each for what it contributes toward strengthening the public relations body of knowledge. All paradigmatic approaches have something useful to contribute toward knowledge production (Martin

& Nakayama, 1999), and even if they are sometimes contradictory to each other, the tensions generated through contradiction can work to stimulate further theoretical debate and reflection (Botan, 1993). It is also important that public relations scholars are able to engage in dialogue that acknowledges the philosophical grounding of the paradigm(s) which they are affiliated to, and the differences and similarities between different paradigms. Simply rejecting out of hand those who hold different philosophical positions is not what we advocate because this can lead to unproductive sparring that simply attempts to prove that one paradigm is better than others. Respecting philosophical differences and identifying the various merits and contributions that different paradigmatic perspectives bring to understanding both the practice and social, cultural, political, and economic significance of public relations in a multicultural world is what we advocate.

In this book, we opt out of the *either-or* approach to the paradigmatic debate and are vested in what we believe is a more fruitful *both-and* perspective that does not privilege any one paradigm as superior to others. The chapters within this volume theorize the complexities of globalization and culture and, along with these, power, as they apply to public relations, from critical/cultural, interpretive, postmodern, and social scientific perspectives. Such multiparadigmatic knowledge is essential for educators, scholars, students, and practitioners engaged in public relations in global cultural contexts to include in their theoretical toolboxes.

This introductory chapter charts out public relations in the context of globalization, notes the dynamic nature of culture and the current deficiencies in how it is theorized in public relations research, foregrounds the range of paradigmatic approaches in public relations scholarship, emphasizes some of the specific concerns of critical approaches, and concludes with a brief overview of the chapters in this volume.

Public Relations in the Climate of Globalization

There is no one theory or definition of globalization that can account for all of its complexities. The study of globalization is interdisciplinary, and the phenomenon has been theorized from cultural, economic, political, critical, postcolonial, and neoliberal (to name a few) perspectives (see Appelbaum & Robinson, 2005; Held & McGrew, 2000). Some scholars argue that globalization in its current form is just the latest phase, albeit a phase distinctly marked by hyper “technological revolution and global restructuring of capital” (Kellner, 2002, p. 287), in a process that is centuries old and started when humans began to cross borders and boundaries for purposes such as trade, spreading of religion, and colonization of other lands (see S. Hall, 1995; Sriramesh, 2009b). In its current form, according to Appelbaum and Robinson (2005),