



Public Relations

Concepts, Practice and Critique

Jacquie L'Etang



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Public Relations

Concepts, Practice and Critique

Dedication

Deek

Do mh' eudail bho chridhe na h-Alba a thug spiorard
ùr, cùrsa ùr, neart ùr dhomh.

Preface

This book aims to provide a critical introduction to key concepts and issues in public relations, and to convey something of critical thinking processes. My approach was to define key concepts and root disciplines to show how insights derived from multiple perspectives can enlighten public relations (PR) theory and practice. Thus, this text provides a gateway to other disciplines. A key feature of the text is the 'Discipline Boxes' that summarize many of the theoretical roots of PR. I wanted to show different ways of thinking about PR and raise questions for students who will shape the occupation over the next thirty or so years.

I should acknowledge some tensions that I experienced between functionalism and criticism while writing this book. I wanted to write something helpful that would shed light on public relations work, the workplace and organizations. At the same time I was keen to try to encourage readers to see PR from alternative perspectives: from those of the journalist, the senior manager, the social critic, the media sociologist and the social theorist. I also wanted to highlight some of the criticisms of PR and the reasons for them.

Each chapter consists of definitional discussion and a review of key issues, especially focusing on those which are challenging or emerging or simply not given that much attention in most texts. In order to balance and contextualize the conceptual discussion, a number of short vignettes (in Boxes) have been selected either to illustrate points or to provide a focus for the reader's critique. The term 'vignettes' is chosen deliberately, since the term 'case study' has particular methodological requirements not achievable in a text of this type and length. Key concepts are listed alphabetically at the beginning of each chapter and appear emboldened where they are defined. Repeated key concepts are listed in chapters where relevant as a reminder for readers. Throughout the text some terms are italicised for emphasis. Also included are short sections of interview, largely taken from my own primary research, again with the intention to leaven theoretical description. The multi-layered nature of the text is designed to intrigue but also to facilitate re-reading at different levels. Fundamental to the book's approach are a series of reflective questions and exercises to help the reader develop his or her own views and to be aware of their own analytic processes. In this way, it is hoped that the book will develop the skills of reflexivity and critical thinking.

The choice of chapter topics requires some explanation: I chose to explore public relations through what I believe to be some core themes and issues for the field. Thus the book explores concepts of promotional culture, globalization

and celebrity, in addition to more predictable topics, such as risk, image and impression management. I was also keen to share some zanier ideas from a variety of disciplines and explore their connection to PR. Where appropriate, I have indicated how some of the great thinkers of our age have reflected upon issues relevant to public relations practice: for example, Habermas, Bourdieu, Chomsky and Foucault. Each chapter also includes a short review of key sources and recommended readings.

Although chapters can be read in any order, the book does have a developmental feel to it. The early chapters start from the basics and the later chapters introduce more complex ideas and open-ended debates. Thus the book can be used at under- or postgraduate levels in a variety of teaching contexts. Less experienced students will appreciate the definitions of concepts and the boxed-out sections of quotes and vignettes, but at a later stage they may return to the book with a more sophisticated understanding, ready to engage with the many critical reflection boxes, questions and exercises that are presented throughout the text.

How did this project come about? During my university career to date I have found that in order to prepare teaching materials I have needed to read contributions from many different disciplines. Increasingly, I have felt that it was educationally important for students to understand original sources because I thought that sometimes concepts were 'lost in translation' or not articulated by some PR authors. Therefore, I wanted to share my own pleasures of intellectual promiscuity! And as someone who has got herself into a reasonable amount of academic trouble asking inconvenient questions, I thought it might be useful for PR practitioners and academics of the future to have access to a text which encouraged their curiosity and rebelliousness to combat the death knells of consensus and apathy.

I was tremendously aware, when writing this book, of the substantial volumes on offer that introduce the public relations student to the field. I see this book as a useful complement to such texts in offering a critical and eclectic view. I have tried to avoid an unduly polemic approach but to provide, nevertheless, a cornucopia of ideas. I was keen to try to write for a different audience and to write in the textbook genre, and I hope that my divergent approach to the topic creates some classroom debate and that students and lecturers alike find the book accessible, engaging, quirky and fun!

The book begins with an introduction to critical thinking and shows how this is relevant to public relations theory and practice. It also introduces a version of the public relations discipline's family tree!

Chapter 2 is the most substantial chapter in the book and covers a breadth of issues, including: basic definitions of public relations and public relations work in practice; public relations processes; public relations as a professionalizing occupation; and the connections between PR, 'psyops' and propaganda. In this

chapter 1 critique public relations evaluation practice; the notion of 'strategy', and dominant interpretations of PR history.

Chapter 3 links the formation of organizational reputation to that of the individual, drawing on psychological, psychoanalytic and impression management sources and making reference to personal image consultancy.

Chapter 4 begins with a brief explanation and critique of the systems metaphor and its use in public relations theory to understand environments, issues and publics. The role of issues management as surveillance is explored in terms of societal implications. The chapter unpacks the concept of risk and the professionalization of risk knowledge and management in relation to PR. Finally, the chapter critically reviews debates on business ethics and corporate social responsibility.

Chapter 5 explains approaches to and definitions of 'public', 'stakeholder', 'public affairs', 'public sphere', 'political communication', 'lobbying' and 'public opinion', and the relevance of these concepts to PR. The work of critical PR academics is highlighted in relation to the process of defining publics and how this affects the relationship between an organization and its publics.

Chapter 6 provides a succinct summary of key media theories and explains their relevance to PR practice. It considers journalism as a professional practice and presents journalism and media studies accounts of PR practice with the intention of contributing to PR students' and practitioners' own self-understanding.

Chapter 7 reviews a challenging field that is subject to the forces of globalization, economics and politics. The main focus is on large-scale health campaigns and the contrast between social change approaches and those based on individual change. Key psychological terms are defined and the limits of psychology to underpin campaigns of persuasion noted.

Chapter 8 reviews managerial thought, highlighting those aspects which relate to public relations. Use is made of critical management theory to show how there is room for more critique within the field of public relations. The chapter includes discussion of management gurus and makes reference to the 'creative industries'.

Chapter 9 explains the field and its development, its relevance to PR and the challenges entailed in trying to analyze organizational thought. A critical post-modern view is presented of organizational culture and a range of issues is discussed, such as emotion and punishment. Finally, there is a critical review of the process of 'communication audit'.

Chapter 10 discusses the cultural model of public relations introduced by critical PR theorists. The chapter considers 'PR in everyday life' and how such an approach might add to the understanding of the role of PR in society and its impact upon the 'lifeworlds' of practitioners and publics. Finally, since celebrity is a feature of promotional culture, there is a brief review of this concept linked

to a consideration of public relations as an occupational culture with its own stars and fame academy.

Chapter 11 reviews ideas about globalization and considers its relevance to PR theory and practice. The chapter suggests that PR has benefited from globalization as well as contributing to its development. The chapter includes a discussion of the diplomatic role played by public relations in a globalized world.

Chapter 12 begins with a selective review of the paradigms in the field, highlighting some key contributors to diversity. It lays out the dominant paradigm and explains a variety of different theoretical approaches to thinking about public relations. The chapter complements the first chapter in the book in its promotion of the critical paradigm.

What this book is not

This book does not teach the administrative logistics or *technic* of public relations, although it discusses its *praxis*.

Textbooks are usually seen as presenting standardized knowledge in the field as Magda Pieczka pointed out:

A textbook is firmly associated with the establishment, in the sense of representing the views central to the field and containing an up-to-date body of knowledge. ... [It] serves as a medium through which the direction of the development of the field is reaffirmed, and also functions as a mechanism for self-perpetuation. (Pieczka, 1996b: 143; 2006c: 347)

I hope this 'textbook' will not only introduce readers to the PR establishment but also to its dis-establishment. Rock on!

Jacquie L'Etang
December 2006

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Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangement at the first opportunity.

It has been a lifetime ambition of mine to be published by Sage and I feel very fortunate to have been given that opportunity. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of the proposal whose points I have tried to take on board.

My work is the product of the education I've received, the people I've worked with, and my friends from many walks of life with whom I've debated issues bearing on communications in our contemporary world. I owe particular debts to my friends Magda Pieczka and Heike Puchan, with whom I worked very happily for 17 and 10 years respectively. They both shaped my ideas and teaching very greatly

and they are therefore silent contributors to this volume (although they can't be held responsible for any weaknesses). In particular, Magda shaped my thinking on systems, public opinion, content analysis, media, professionalization, management gurus and much else besides. To my knowledge she was the first person to refer to PR practitioners as 'discourse workers' (Round table call, Stirling Media Research Institute, 1999) and to articulate the term 'Sociology of public relations' (Pieczka, 2006c: 32). My colleague Derek Hodge read and commented on the manuscript and has also helped me develop my ideas in relation to research and evaluation, media technology and content analysis. My colleague Jairo Lugo helped me greatly in relation to journalism education and media campaigns. I am also grateful to a former colleague, Professor Paul Jeffcutt, who introduced me to organizational symbolism and postmodern approaches to organizational analysis. The exercise at the beginning of Chapter 9 and the Indian fable are based on his teaching, which I observed in the early 1990s. In 2006 I was fortunate to attend a Sports Studies conference at Stirling during which Professor Coalter, Professor of Sports Policy at Stirling University, reviewed programmes of sport in developing countries. His comments on the formulation of objectives were clearly usefully applicable to public relations and I am indebted to his insights.

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Introduction: Critical Thinking and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

1

BEFORE YOU READ A SINGLE WORD...

Take a pen and write down your response to the following:

- What should a public relations text do and why?
- What do you want to learn?
- How do you want to change?
- What would you like to change about the world?
- Why are you interested in public relations?

Keep your answers somewhere safe. (You could set them up as a blog.) Do not change them. But do add to them or record any changes in perspective as this happens. This is a form of *research diary* in which you keep reflections and personal observations and record change. Here you are researching and observing yourself!

Key concepts

Assumptions	Functionalism
Critical theory	Interdisciplinary
Critical thinking	Paradigm
Dominant paradigm	Reflexivity

What's this book about and where is it coming from?

This is a textbook with a twist! It aims to achieve two objectives: to introduce key concepts in public relations using a wide range of interdisciplinary sources and to stimulate reflexive and critical thinking which can inform academic and professional work in the field.

The book was inspired by the desire to share some alternative perspectives with student readers and by the ambition to write a text which not only challenged assumptions, but showed how and why it is important for public relations practitioners to do so. Challenging received truths has long been seen as important to public relations practitioners in the workplace. See Box 1.1 for examples.

Box 1.1 Practitioners' perspectives on challenging norms

'Resourceful, direct and prepared to challenge the status quo.' (Peter Brooker, *PRWeek*, 30 June 2006)

'A driving force, not afraid to challenge change.' (James Lundie, *PRWeek*, 30 June 2006)

'Energy, presence, sensibility, a broad orientation, and, most of all, 'guts' is what a practitioner needs to succeed'. (Top head-hunter from the Netherlands) (van Ruler, 2005: 159–173)

'What I look for [when I'm recruiting] is: have they got critical abilities? Have they got a critical mind? Are they persuasive in writing and oral communication? Can they bring people along with them? Thirdly, integrity, and here I look for evidence that they're likely to have personal courage – that is to take their hat off the peg and to stand up and talk for themselves, or get the hell out of it – have they got real courage?' (Interview, senior practitioner, 1998)

'Part of my job here is if there are problems of morale or if people, however senior, are not doing their jobs particularly well, for example if a board director doesn't seem to be communicating and inspiring, then it's up to me to tell the very senior management that I'm not actively happy with this. That's often quite difficult but someone has to do it because organizations are constantly changing organisms and if they don't understand what's driving change, whether it's good or bad – they won't go forward.' (Interview, senior practitioner, 1998)

A key ideal for public relations consultants is that if asked to work on an account of which they did not approve, they should act according to their ethical principles and leave. Why is this so important for public relations? One might suggest that precisely because PR as an occupation has been critiqued by the British media since the 1950s, and apparently has a poor reputation in the UK, it

is all the more important for individual practitioners publicly to espouse integrity and appear as authentic and truthful as possible in order to establish trust.

Book aims

By the end of this book readers should be able to:

- describe, discuss and critique theoretical and applied (practical) approaches to public relations at campaign, societal and global levels
- apply the key theoretical concepts that are required to construct and deconstruct public relations practice
- understand the reasons for the emergence and growth of public relations in a variety of cultural contexts
- understand how public relations has emerged as a discipline, its conceptual roots and main paradigms
- apply critical thinking to concepts and cases

Does this book have an agenda?

Yes, this book is written to encourage you to explore diverse perspectives and to reflect critically on your own opinions. This book is also written from a particular point of view: it is critical, and written within the European context from the periphery of Great Britain (Scotland). As with my other articles and books, it has been written partly in response to those from the dominant paradigm. In this book I explain something of that debate and how academics in public relations approach the subject from different perspectives. I write within the critical tradition and this approach is explained later in this opening chapter. As you encounter the various arguments and read other books alongside this one, you should start to develop a sense of your own opinions, where you sit in relation to debates and why.

CHAPTER AIMS

On completion of this chapter you will be able to:

- understand the benefits of 'critical thinking' and be able to apply the concept to texts and case studies
- define critical theory
- understand and explain the concept of 'paradigm'
- notice assumptions that exist in writing and arguments in texts or broadcast media
- explain why critical thinking is important in public relations

Chapter contents

The chapter begins by defining critical thinking and critical theory before explaining how to develop critical thinking skills. This is followed by a short reflection on the nature of public relations as an academic subject and questions that are raised as to its status. The notion of 'paradigm' is then introduced in the context of public relations concepts and research, and subsequently linked to the notion of assumptions that underpin arguments and the ways in which we can uncover these so as to better determine the motivation that lies behind a piece of communication, whether academic, professional or journalistic.

Critical thinking

There are at least two rather different ways of conceiving **critical thinking**. The first is to define such work as emanating from critical theory, which emerged in the 1920s from Western Marxism which highlighted maldistribution of power and sought to change society. Work in this tradition:

- challenges existing assumptions
- analyzes and critiques policy or practice
- alters boundaries of or between fields and thus changes the agenda by introducing new topics or approaches or ways of thinking about a field

Critical theory (CT) particularly focuses on power, its distribution and elucidating the structures and processes which limit human potential. Critical theorists tend to write with a view to highlighting unfair practices in order to change society (L'Etang, 2005).

Another way of thinking about critical approaches is in terms of developing intellectual skills to tackle such work. Critical work assesses ideas and arguments, working through the pros and cons. It is critical, but not necessarily negative – better to think of it as the surgeon's rather than the assassin's knife.

But how should one start? Where to begin? In fact a good start is to question our own beliefs and motivations and being clear about our own assumptions and biases. Only then are we in a position to ask:

- Does this author present their view as one of several options, as factual information or as morally right?
- Is the author fair or do they reveal a bias? If they reveal a bias, are they open about this and do they explain their reasoning for this position? (Ruggiero, 1996b: 6)
- How does this relate to my own views – how can I or should I accommodate this new information? (Paul and Elder, 2004: 1)

Developing critical thinking skills for reading and writing

Drawing on Paul and Elder (2004) and Cottrell (2005), it is useful to ask:

- Is the purpose clear?
- What is the scope of the main and subsidiary questions (aim and objectives)?
- What assumptions are made – are they implicit or explicit?
- What sorts of arguments are used and how much evidence is presented with them?
- Are alternative views presented or is a reason stated for their exclusion? (Cottrell, 2005)

Critical thinking analyzes arguments and ‘unpicks’ concepts. It often looks at ‘the other side of the coin’ or plays ‘devil’s advocate’ to test an argument. Sometimes it will take a minority or unpopular view, criticizing those in power or exposing unfair practice.

In short, as Cottrell (2005) pointed out, critical thinking demands:

- a healthy scepticism
- patience to work through someone else’s argument
- being open-minded
- being cautious with personal emotional responses such as anger, frustration and anxiety
- juggling a range of ideas for purposes of comparison
- supporting arguments with evidence and experiences from ‘the real world’.

Interdisciplinary perspectives

You, as a PR student, may have been asked by family or friends: ‘How can you study that? It’s not a proper subject – why don’t you study psychology or sociology?’

Such questions challenge the notion of public relations as a legitimate subject to study. Yet subjects such as psychology and sociology started in the same way, borrowing concepts from other areas to build new disciplines. For example, psychology evolved in the nineteenth century from the disciplines of ethology, physics, statistics and philosophy. And sociology emerged as a ‘scientific study of collective human behaviour’, the consequence of nineteenth-century philosophers, faced with the massive upheaval of the Industrial Revolution, asking questions about how society evolved (Ruggiero, 1996: 1). Key ideas which emerged to explain developments included: natural progression; survival of the fittest; conflict; and consensus. These assumptions also influence the way that different historians explain the emergence of public relations in various cultures. So in a way, public relations can be seen as a form of sociology even though *sociology of public relations* is a term barely heard. (Piecza, 2006c: 328–329)