In contrast to traditional public relations scholarship, Fitch and Motion recognize the complexity of public relations communications in their book, ‘Popular culture and social change: The hidden work of public relations’ published in 2021. Rather than being focused on building ‘mutually beneficial relationships’, Fitch and Motion show how public relations communications are often entwined, and sometimes disguised, within popular culture and social change. As the authors state, “boundaries are porous: public relations is not a two-way symmetrical, mutually beneficial practice… but rather one where the boundaries between audiences/fans/publics and producers/practitioners/organisations/and others engaged in communicative activity are dynamic and increasingly blurred” (p. 5-6). Fitch and Motion’s focus on the ‘unseen’ within public relations is a strength of their book. They present an alternative and nuanced view of public relations, as a set of social and cultural practices, which can advance neoliberal agendas but can also be harnessed for social justice, change, and transformation.

Throughout the book, Fitch and Motion reveal the role of public relations in normalizing and naturalizing particular ‘ways of thinking’ in popular cultures that are often commercialized across diverse social and cultural settings. For instance, Motion’s ethnographic account in chapter two unpacks in an illustrative nature how public relations is inescapably embedded into the seemingly mundane of her everyday life, from influencing her decision-making to go for a walk, eat ‘super foods’, and shop for designer organic cotton. The naturalized ways of thinking are also analyzed in regard to the representation and expectations within the public relations practice itself, with chapter four shedding light on the socially constructed ‘PR girl’ who must have ‘the right look’ to ensure occupational ‘fit’. In doing so, the authors demonstrate how the “gendered embodiment of public relations replicates sexual hierarchies and norms” (p. 63). This chapter is particularly noteworthy, as it draws attention to a significant issue that is seldom covered but would resonate with many public relations practitioners.

As well as critically scrutinizing public relations communications, Fitch and Motion highlight how public relations can influence social change and transformation. This is demonstrated within a range of contexts, such as through fashion, campaigns, and protests. As outlined in chapter seven, public relations has a longstanding history of protecting power structures and contributing to racial inequality, but can also make visible and give voice to those who are situated in the margins. This chapter is focused on the Indigenous peoples of Australia and covers topical issues that are important in the contemporary climate, although including an additional chapter focused on race and reconciliation in another setting could have provided further depth to the authors’ arguments and added greater appeal to readers outside of the Pacific. Nevertheless, in chapter eight, Fitch provides a considered analysis of the communications surrounding protests in Catalonia, showing how social media can enable protestors and dissenters to contribute to public debate but also spread misinformation.
In closing, ‘Popular culture and social change: The hidden work of public relations’ extends public relations scholarship by examining a wide range of topics that have received little academic attention to date. The book contains autoethnographic accounts and analyses, supported by esteemed scholarly literature. While the authors’ privilege can sometimes be evident in their narration, this approach results in a personal tone that is likely to be relatable to many readers. There is no assumed prior knowledge about public relations of the readers, and Fitch and Motion capture complex concepts in an easy to read, captivating manner. This book is recommended, not only for communications students, practitioners, and scholars, but also for those interested in social justice and the power dynamics behind public relations.

References


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