

Demetrious, K. (2013). *Public Relations, Activism, and Social Change: Speaking Up*. New York, NY: Routledge. (Winner of the 2014 NCA PRIDE Book Award.)

Reviewed by: [Marianne Sison](#)

In the book, *Public Relations, Activism, and Social Change: Speaking Up*, Kristin Demetrious starts off with a bold view that questions the existence and continued viability of public relations in its current modernist, functionalist and pluralist form. She argues that a radical change to public relations is urgently needed within a rapidly changing environment. Drawing from Beck and Habermas, Demetrious critiques modernist public relations practice as manipulative and inappropriate for risk societies. Echoing critical public relations scholars, she argues for a radical shift in public relations education and practice.

Using a socio-cultural approach, Demetrious demonstrates her argument through a discussion of three case studies of grassroots activism in Western Victoria between 1995 and 2003. She traces the history and development of public relations and critiques the fields functionalist and pluralist perspectives. Through her insightful analyses of cases involving grassroots activism, she cites the complexities faced by practitioners and activists alike. While previous demarcations between ?corporates and their ?publics were clearly defined, and provided strategists with specific tactical positions of response, the lines are becoming blurred with corporates and their agencies co-opting activism as part of their public relations arsenal.

However there are elements when Demetrious position about public relations and its ability to enable social change is unclear. In one instance, she purports its potential but on another, she questions its ability to do so and proposes that public communication might be the more appropriate mechanism for social change.

While I agree that much of modernist and functionalist corporate public relations practice needs to change to enable more voices, I am unsure whether public communication is sufficient and the more appropriate way. When reading through the principles of public communication (pp. 131-134), I wondered how they would read if I replaced ?public communication with ?public relations. I would say that in some cases, they would be workable. Let us take the first one, as an example, Public communication is open to possibility and permeated by ideas. I think public relations practitioners, even corporate ones, already do this. Of course the differences in approaches and solutions will depend largely on the organisational goals. So the exploration of ideas will be different between Shell and the Anti Cancer Council of Victoria for example.

I agree that activist groups have more latitude to develop creative, more meaningful and more holistic communicative approaches that are borne out of passion and commitment. And while the life spans of particular activist groups are limited by their campaign objectives, corporate public relations practitioners have much to learn from them.

This also led me to wonder why the book did not explore the idea of practitioners as activist advocates (Berger & Reber, 2006), organisational activists (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) or as agents of critical conscience (Sison, 2007).

The books chapter titles reflect Demetrious goals of clarifying public relations through the prism of activism. In the introductory ?What is Public Relations, Where is Public Relations which examines the industrys development, she posits an alternative definition of public relations as: an organizational social practice within the normative conditions of the twentieth century drawing on the functionalist notion of ?harmony to justify the control of *contradictions* between and through public and private discourses in order to maintain a dominant position of privilege and influence" (Demetrious, 2013, p.31). In the concluding chapter entitled Not Public Relations, Sustainable Communication, she proposes a reworking of publics as marginalised publics, scarcity society publics, reflexive publics and digital publics.

In the current environment, there is no doubt that modernist corporate public relations needs to change its paradigm and include grassroots activists, NGOs and ?netizens as priority or equally important stakeholders. The extent of social medias impact on everyday business has already made practitioners admit to relinquishing control. As discourse producers, future public relations practitioners need to reflect on how their words, actions and events can meaningfully enable social change. Whether we use public communication or stick with public relations with all its baggage, communicative practice will always be value-laden. Communicative practice also reflects a position of privilege whether one is a CEO or a grassroots activist with their abilities to articulate issues, lead and mobilise groups of people.

As Demetrious rightly indicated, this paradigm shift has to start at the university level. While many public relations academics are former activists, there are also as many who are former or current practitioners who are either constrained or inspired to change by their experience. While academic curricula are constrained by university as

well as industry accreditation requirements, I would encourage fellow academics and scholars to become organisational activists and challenge the discipline from within and engender ethical thinking and practice in public relations, or public communication, for that matter.

References:

Berger, B. & Reber, B. (2006). *Gaining Influence in Public Relations: The Role of Resistance in Practice*. Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Holtzhausen, D. & Voto, R. (2002). Resistance from the margins: The postmodern public relations practitioner as organisational activist. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 14 (1), 57-84.

Sison, M. D. (2010). Recasting public relations roles: Agents of compliance, control or conscience? *Journal of Communication Management* 14 (4), 319 - 336.

About the reviewer: As Deputy Dean (International) in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT, Marianne is responsible for strategic leadership and oversight of offshore programs, international institutional partnerships, student and staff mobility programs, international student recruitment and marketing, internationalising curriculum and research partnerships. She is Chair of the International & Development Committee, a member of the School Executive, Learning & Teaching Committee, and Research & Innovation Committee. Marianne's research interests focus on international and multicultural communication, corporate social responsibility, global public relations, public relations education, public relations in Southeast Asia, organisational values and leadership, and organisational communication.