

Surma, A. (2013). *Imagining the cosmopolitan in public and professional writing*. Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reviewed by: [Kristin Demetrious](#)

PR writing without borders

In recent years Anne Surma has established as an original, new voice within the critical public relations stream, focussing on ways PR seeks to create a coherent relationship with society through its 'stories and texts'. Her recent monograph takes up this theme once again, but adds a new dimension by exploring the different ways that public and professional writers, and their writing, dynamically intersect with social change. An overarching consideration for Surma is rethinking ethics, imagination and rhetoric within globalisation (p.1).

The main thrust of the argument is that public and professional writers and the texts they produce, such as brochures, blogs, tweets, videos, reports and letters are powerful interlocutors mediating between organisations and the public in the transforming social context of the 21st century. Whether used to construct a national or gendered identity, or selectivity direct our awareness away from or toward preferred corporate stories, make no mistake, these texts are working as social practice in ways that are globally connected and historically situated. Moreover, the impacts of this will be felt across and through time.

Not surprisingly, Surma argues that writing and 'meaning making' must incorporate a deeper ethical obligation that appreciates the social, political, economic, and cultural ambivalences, obstacles, inequities and competing interests involved in the normative obligation to write responsibility to and in relation to locally and globally situated others, in public and professional contexts (pp. 5-6). Building on social theory from luminaries such as sociologist Ulrich Beck, she advances the idea as critical cosmopolitanism from which a workable conceptual and theoretical framework for public and professional writers can be formed. This unifying idea that public and professional writers are global citizens inextricably bound up in social change is understood further through the 'ethics of care' which she says develops an appreciation of social positioning and historical embeddedness (p.28). Therefore writers should look at the consequences of their trade for the overlooked, the marginal and the forgotten.

Surma's writing is fluent, logical and deft. Uncluttered yet complex she manages to construct a nuanced argument with creative style. The book is divided into seven chapters, the first two establish her approach, while Chapter 3 examines how digital and real world contexts inter-relate, with particular focus on the visual, to construct powerful meanings while offering the means of reimagining difference. Chapter 4 explores potential uses of the written text in shutting down ideas and controlling identity. Chapter 5 offers insight into large-scale organisational change and adaptation to globalisation through a study of an Australian university which includes an empirical element. While Chapter 6 is a fine grained examination of how corporate social responsibility (CSR) texts can divert our gaze from pressing areas of injustice and repression, especially for women. Chapter 7 is an opportunity for Surma to draw out key points and explore briefly the culture of visuality through the global Kony 2012 campaign.

I particularly enjoyed reading Chapter 3 'Writing in the Network' which analyses the intersection between the internet, globalised economy and the lived experience of citizens. In this Surma examines the essentialism of social and technological contexts such as the internet that have framed the production of 'truth' and an expectation for public and professional writers to be 'unequivocal'. Surma's original and close observations are always a pleasure to read, and not just for the insights she brings into the discourse of PR or even the writing process but for her poetic reappraisal. Chapter 6 *The Multinational Corporation: Writing Cosmopolitan Responsibly* takes the reader in related but unexpected directions. It analyses the discourse of CSR in relation to globalisation as both masculinist and idealist. It is here Surma explores feminist ethics of care as a means of responding to the gendered writing of corporate responsibility texts and resisting their frequently reductive accounts of globalisation as ultimately benign and inevitably progressive (p. 109).

The book's remit is generally concerned with 'non-fiction' writing and most of the time this activity is referred to as 'public and professional writing' however stronger alignment to and positioning within a discipline stream would have benefited here. While the reader assumes that CSR texts such as Nike's Girl Effect campaign are produced by 'PR writers' much of the book is referred to as professional writing - this could be referring to journalists, editors or even scriptwriters. The distinctions could have been drawn out more as there are many different traditions associated with the various strands of professional writing.

From my perspective a more detailed discussion of PR as a discourse would have been useful, not least because the corporate history of PR especially in the US, advances Surma's argument about the commercial colonisation and domination of public discourse. Debate about the role and impact and ethics of corporate communication practices such as PR continues to gather momentum in academe, especially through movements such as critical public relations. Situated here, Surma's monograph could prove to be an invaluable resource in setting innovative

and scholarly new directions for curriculum development around public relations writing. Such a development could deliver PR students with high quality, relevant, challenging and theoretically grounded new perspectives that will transform their thinking in ways that will serve them well in any professional environment.

This is a scholarly and an ambitious book. Corporate narrative and counter-narrative and how they work within new social contexts within the public sphere are all within Surmas purview. Therefore the public and professional writer is not just a passive employee churning out banal copy from an isolated or representative position. As such this activity is central of ongoing social life and demands a deeper reflection and insight as well as an embedded commitment to the ethical responsibilities it generates. This is a strong and passionate attempt to get public and professional writers to see themselves differently.

About the reviewer: *Kristin Demetrious is an Associate Professor in Public Relations at Deakin University, Australia. She is a highly awarded teacher who has gained national recognition for developing a new curriculum in public relations that engages students with contentious debates around activism and ethics. In 2013 Kristin published her first book, Public Relations, Activism and Social Change: Speaking Up, with Routledge Research, New York. That same year she also published an edited collection with co-author Christine Daymon titled: Gender and Public Relations: Critical Perspectives on Voice, Image and Identity, as part of the Routledge New Directions in Public Relations and Communication Research series, London. Later that year Gender and PR received the 2013 PRIDE Book Award for outstanding Innovation, Development, and Educational Achievement in PR from the Public Relations Division National Communication Association (NCA), USA. Now a double award winner; Kristins monograph ?Public Relations, Activism and Social Change: Speaking Up has been awarded the 2014 PRIDE Book Award for outstanding Innovation, Development, and Educational Achievement in PR from the Public Relations Division National Communication Association (NCA), USA.*