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**BOOK REVIEW: Heath, R. L., & Coombs, W. T. (2006). *Today's public relations: An introduction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.**

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This book aims to create a basic public relations text by building on recent research and theory. It develops four thematic strands: the heritage of rhetorical theory, the influence of new technologies, public relations as relationship building, and ethical challenges (Heath & Coombs, 2006, p. xv).

The rich heritage of rhetorical theory has not previously been given in-depth coverage in other similar public relations texts, neither has there been an emphasis on relationship building and ethical practice. These themes are a welcome addition, especially since they are maintained throughout the text. Many public relations textbooks simply devote a chapter to ethics, which suggests that this is a topic which can be summarily dealt with in theory but is often forgotten when considering how ethics can be integrated into practice. The inclusion of vignettes of practical case studies at the beginning of each chapter, and professional reflections from public relations practitioners, ethical quandaries, and Web notes within each chapter attempts to integrate theory and practice, and makes this text useful for both students and practitioners. These provide constant reminders not only of the strategic nature of public relations but of the concurrent responsibilities for ethical practice. It is therefore perhaps surprising to see a separate chapter on *Ethical and Legal Restraints on Public Relations Practice* appearing as late as Chapter 9. It would seem that this chapter should have followed the introductory chapter on *Strategic Relationship Building: An Ethical Organization Communicating Effectively*.

The authors have made an attempt in Chapter 15 to look to the future of public relations, the impact of globalisation, and the potential role of

the Web and technology in shaping future practice. Yet, despite an excellent discussion of intercultural public relations practice, this textbook presents a clearly U.S. view of public relations without acknowledging this ethnocentric perspective sufficiently early in the text. I would suggest that Chapter 15 should be sub-divided, with the intercultural and global issues section following Chapter 2 – *History of Public Relationships*, perhaps with the title *The Future of Global Relationships*, thus contextualising the U.S. perspective offered within this text within the challenges increasingly faced by practitioners in a fragmented globalised world. The remaining section of Chapter 15 on the role of new technologies is useful, but, surprisingly, omits any reference to developing technologies such as mobile phones or iPods, and this section might more usefully be integrated into Chapter 11, *Selecting Media, Technologies, and Communication Tools*, and Chapter 12, *Publicity, Promotion, and Writing*.

The remaining chapters provide good general coverage of the processes of public relations practice, albeit as mentioned earlier from a U.S. perspective. For example, twelve of the fifteen vignettes are U.S. based, as are nine of the twelve professional reflections and most of the Web references. This means that the text would need to be substantially augmented with local examples for teaching use within Australasia. Additionally, the discussion within particular chapters varies in scope. The chapter on issues management, for example, provides a discussion of some depth. It avoids the trap of considering all issues management from the perspective of the corporate organisation which so many texts fall into, and addresses the perspectives of not-for-profit organisations, activists, and

government organisations, as well as corporate business. In contrast, some of the other chapters, for example those on media relations and writing, would need to be augmented by more specialised texts for teaching beyond a very basic level.

Additionally, it is perhaps surprising, given the comments by the authors that this text builds on recent research and theory, that there are some notable omissions in Chapter 8, *Public Relations Theory in Practice*. For example, I would expect some mention of Moffitt's (1994) work on multiple images, Leitch and Neilson's (2001) work redefining publics, and Beck's (1992) concept of a risk society. There is additionally no mention in the chapter on global issues of Cheney and Christensen's (2001a, 2001b) work on the blurring of the boundaries between public relations, organisational communication, and marketing as organisations seek to define a distinct identity for themselves in an increasingly crowded communication environment. The recommended readings at the end of each chapter do, however, provide some recent references which make this text a worthwhile starting point for further research.

The text book is written in an interesting and very readable style; although, at times, from a layout perspective, the text is a little dense. In some chapters, examples given in the body of the text could have been highlighted as mini-cases in boxed text. Discussion questions are additionally sometimes embedded within the general layout and could have been highlighted throughout as *Challenge Boxes* as in Chapter 10; and, although the *Summary Questions* at the end of each chapter provide a good check of understanding for the reader, they do not always invite in-depth reflection. The *Exercises* at the end of each chapter, however, provide some excellent suggestions for classroom activities.

In summary, the authors generally achieve what they set out to do, and despite the limitations I have indicated, they provide a useful addition to the range of basic public relations texts available to students, practitioners, and researchers.

## References

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