

Johnston, J., & Zawawi, C. (2009). *Public relations: Theory and practice (3rd ed.)*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin

Reviewed by: [John Cokley](#)

The subtitle reads: 'the complete companion for new and not-so-new practitioners. This is correct of course but, on reflection, only half the story of this book.

Johnston and Zawawi have created one of the best texts for those keen to work in or teach public relations, but its also an important one for people who want to figure out how the public relations scene works.

And that should include all media professionals because public relations has turned out to be, along with advertising, the dominant communication channel.

Too sweeping? Look around. Journalism has been comprehensively outgunned for labour, resources and public influence by our competitors in public relations and advertising. And some of that out-gunning (in our region at least) has been due to the insight and experience offered by these two author/editors and their collaborators in this book.

Firstly, the range of products and services offered in public relations beats journalism hands-down. Turn to Pages 8-9 for the list of 20 key activities the sector provides its clients.

If public relations was a shop its shelves would look far more abundantly stocked with goodies than the journalism shop down the road, and that makes for a better range of employment opportunities for its practitioners.

So its no wonder businesses in the past have been more willing, and financially able, to hire public relations graduates than old-fashioned journalism graduates: they offer a return on investment more than equal to their employment costs.

Johnston and Zawawi even offer a Venn diagram to show how public relations fits in with marketing and advertising: a road-map for businesses showing them 'how to employ public relations graduates.

Show me the text which tells news media employers how many things journalists are good for? Jay Rosens seminal 1999 work on public journalism, *What Are Journalists For*, discusses the social role of journalists but leaves the essential question unanswered: what are journalists good for?

Secondly, the feminisation of public relations has contributed to the demise of journalism, and is likely to continue to do so. Sixty percent of journalists in Australia, the US and UK are males over 40 and the declining audiences available to these old men are testimony to what this means. Whereas 72% of Australian public relations practitioners are women. They all come from a pool of university students made up 80% of young women and 20% of young men. Stands to reason that in a market where approximately 80 percent of buying decisions are made by women, public relations turns out to be a more influential communication channel.

Thirdly, Johnston and Zawawi picture their discipline in terms of 'systems theory (p. 58 ff) and this also contributes to the outgunning of journalism. The approach that a particular discipline might have a place in a functioning business system is one that journalists have ignored at their peril for centuries, and an approach that might 'given the right will and determination' be their salvation.

The best journalism has been able to come up with has been the 'Fourth Estate concept and the Four Theories of the Press, trying to explain how 'society needs journalism.

This is still going around: witness the March 18, 2009 article 'The Death and Life of Great American Newspapers by Nichols & McChesney which appeared in the April 6, 2009 edition of *The Nation* *Public Relations: Theory and Practice* but there is a word limit on this review, after all. The books worth every cent of the \$65 and its an all-Australian product (apart from the fact that Zawawi now lives in the Middle East).

**About the reviewer:** *Dr John Cokley is lecturer in journalism at the University of Queensland and a 28-year-veteran of news production (mostly newspapers and magazines but more recently online) in Australia.*

