

Kelleher, T. (2007). *Public relations online: Lasting concepts for changing media*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Reviewed by: [Elsbeth Tilley](#)

Honolulu-based academic Tom Kelleher's name has been cropping up with increasing frequency in connection with online public relations. Sage released his first book, *Public relations online: Lasting concepts for changing media*, in 2007, and lately he has been busy editing a special issue on social media in *Journal of Public Relations Research* (published as their third issue of 2010).

Kelleher also walks the talk, with his own blog about public relations online, "thoughts and theory," at <http://tkell.blogspot.com> and a Twitter page (complete with enviously alluring pictures of the perfectly curving Hawaii surf which he confesses to loving even more than surfing online) at <http://twitter.com/tkell>. (The blog looks a bit light on posts in 2010/11 so no doubt he's been busy with books and journals and juggling both teaching and administrative roles at the School of Communications at the University of Hawaii, but the Twitter feed is a regular and consistent source of interesting tidbits on all things public relations online.)

Kelleher's book, although first published in 2007, was re-circulated to prospective instructors by Sage in late 2010 and as soon as I read the first chapter I decided it was a keeper. Kelleher is a great writer. I'm still trying to determine exactly what his secret is, but somehow he manages to sound friendly, yet surgically skewer the point, at the same time. Perhaps it is his background experience as a science communicator (with NASA, no less) that enables him to explain complex concepts in an accessible style. Whatever his secret, it works. The book feels chatty but is actually succinctly instructive, jam-packed with information, and doesn't need a single word cut! Jargon and acronyms (B2C, PSA, XBRL, GDT and more) are clearly and immediately explained (and for me it was a good test that if I did not know what they were, clearly I needed to keep reading the book!), sentence length is short yet varied for pleasant rhythm, each paragraph has a single clear point, and the structure of each chapter leads systematically through an uncluttered, cohesive argument. Students who complain about wordy textbooks ought to find nothing to dislike in this!

The overall structure of the book is also innovative yet logical (for example the useful split of online relationship management into news-driven relationships, commerce-driven relationships and issue-driven relationships). This nuanced understanding of the necessity to differentiate between different *kinds* of online public relations is clearly driven by (and supported with examples from) long-term practical experience. Plus with ten chapters (each concluding with a "hands-on" activity to apply the discussion to a real case or issue) it's ideal for a typical chapter-a-week teaching schedule. If nothing else, students could be pointed to this as a model of first-rate writing and purpose-built structure.

There is plenty else of value in the book as well. Kelleher offers familiar (and often disarmingly personal) real examples to which students will instantly relate (such as ordering pizza or shoes online), then unpacks them effortlessly with clear connections to relevant theory tenets. In particular, the "Questionable Claims" boxes stand out as an exceptional way to demonstrate the value of research. This is exactly what is needed in an over-hyped field such as online public relations to encourage students to think critically about what they find. Both online content and offline materials about what is happening online have been guilty at times of the breathless hard sell (and Kelleher is affable enough as narrator to admit that he may be guilty of such himself at times), but the "Questionable Claims" boxes instantly demonstrate the risks of untested assertions and the value of scholarly analysis in debunking or verifying them. For example, did you know that actually, despite its apparently rapid rate of adoption, the Internet has *not* grown faster than any other new medium in history? Kelleher compiles research from a range of sources which suggest that, when calculated in comparable ways, radio and television actually had faster uptake rates than the Internet.

Of course, more could be done throughout the book to develop the breadth and depth of connections with theory and research (but more can always be done in that regard), and there's an absence of explicit engagement with critical theory (although the value of critical *thinking* is implicit throughout). However, even short as they are, the "Questionable Claims" boxes are an invaluable starting point to wider discussions about the differences between hype and research, and the risks of buying in to the former.

The role of communication theory in interpreting, explaining and predicting communication behavior is also implicit in the whole premise of the book: lasting concepts for changing media. In focusing on usage, rather than tools, Kelleher reminds us that the underlying doctrine of normative public relations models (his biggest emphasis is on two-way and relationship models) is flexible enough to remain applicable in changing technological environments. He pares examples back to elemental communication theory principles that transcend the particular online tool that created them: that way, we can avoid getting caught up with the messy specifics of technology that change faster than the publishing cycle of books like this one (p. 2). To "remember the basics of good communication whatever the context is something that a lot of people have been saying, but Kelleher adds value to the discussion because he *shows* as well as *tells* what this means in practice. It seems to have worked, too, given this 2007 book does not feel at all dated in 2011.

In short, as an introductory textbook for beginning undergraduates that starts them on the journey of asking purposeful questions about, and applying communication theory concepts to, public relations practices in the digital world with which they are so comfortable, this book is ideal. Instructors seeking something for more advanced undergraduates and postgraduates will probably want something more explicitly theoretical and encompassing a broader range of critical frameworks, but as an appetizer that whets students taste-buds for research as a relevant and interesting way to understand the world they live in, it would be hard to go past Kellehers compact and friendly book.

About the reviewer: *Dr Elspeth Tilley is a senior lecturer in the School of Communication, Journalism & Marketing at Massey University, Wellington. Her research looks at discourse in different contexts, including the culture and literature of postcolonial societies, the ethics of public and organisational communication, and adult literacy.*