L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page i

Public Relations Concepts, Practice and Critique

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page ii

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page iii

Public Relations Concepts, Practice and Critique

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L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page iv

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L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page v

Dedication

Deck

Do mh′ evdail bho chridhe na h–Alba a thug spiorard
ùr, cùrsa ùr, neart ùr dhomh.

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page vi

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page vii

Contents

Preface		viii
Acknowledgements		xii
1	Introduction: critical thinking and interdisciplinary perspectives	1
2	Public relations: defining the discipline and the practice	16
3	Reputation, image and impression management	46
4	Risk, issues and ethics	69
5	Public affairs and the public sphere	96
6	Media perspectives: critique, effects and evaluation	118
7	Health communication and social marketing	135
8	Public relations and management	158
9	Organizational communication: understanding and researching organizations	186
10	Public relations in 'promotional culture' and 'in everyday life'	211
11	Public relations in a globalized world	229
12	Key thinkers and thought in public relations	244
Biblography		263
Index		283

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page viii

Preface

This book aims to provide a critical introduction to key concepts and issues in public relations, and to convey something of critical thinking processes. My approach was to define key concepts and root disciplines to show how insights derived from multiple perspectives can enlighten public relations theory and practice. Thus, this text provides a gateway to other disciplines. A key feature of the text is the 'Discipline Boxes' that summarise many of the thids retical roots of PR. I wanted to show different ways of thinking about PR and raise questions for students who will shape the occupation over the next thirty or so years.

I should acknowledge some tensions that I experienced between functionalism and criticism while writing this book. I wanted to write something helpful that would shed light on public relations work, the workplace and organizations. At the same time I was keen to try to encourage readers to see PR from alternative perspectives: from those of the journalist, the senior manager, the social critic, the media sociologist and the social theorist. I also wanted to highlight some of the criticisms of PR and the reasons for them.

Each chapter consists of definitional discussion and a review of key issues, especially focusing on those which are challenging or emerging or simply not given that much attention in most texts. In order to balance and contextualize the conceptual discussion, a number of short vignettes (in Boxes) have been selected either to illustrate points or to provide a focus for the reader's critique. The term 'vignettes' is chosen deliberately, since the term 'case study' has particular methodological requirements not achievable in a text of this type and length. Also included are short sections of interview, largely taken from my own primary research, again with the intention to leaven theoretical description. The multi-layered nature of the text is designed to intrigue but also to facilitate re-reading at different levels. Fundamental to the book's approach are a series of reflective questions and exercises to help the reader develop his or her own views and to be aware of their own analytic processes. In this way, it is hoped that the book will develop the skills of reflexivity and critical thinking.

The choice of chapter topics requires some explanation: I chose to explore public relations through what I believe to be some core themes and issues for the field. Thus the book explores concepts of promotional culture, globalization and celebrity, in addition to more predictable topics, such as risk, image and impression management. I was also keen to share some zanier ideas from a

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page ix

variety of disciplines and explore their connection to PR. Where appropriate, I have indicated how some of the great thinkers of our age have reflected upon issues relavant to public relations practice: for example, Habermas, Bourdieu, Chomsky and Foucault. Each chapter also includes a short review of key sources and recommended readings.

Although chapters can be read in any order, the book does have a developmental feel to it. The first chapters start from the basics and the later chapters introduce more complex ideas and open-ended debates. Thus the book can be used at under- or postgraduate levels in a variety of teaching contexts. Less experienced students will appreciate the definitions of concepts and the boxed out sections of quotes and vignettes, but at a later stage they may return to the book with a more sophisticated understanding, ready to engage with the many critical reflection boxes, questions and exercises that are presented throughout the text.

How did this project come about? During my university career to date I have found that in order to prepare teaching materials I have needed to read contributions from many different disciplines. Increasingly, I have felt that it was educationally important for students to understand original sources because I thought that sometimes concepts were 'lost in translation' or not articulated by some PR authors. Therefore, I wanted to share my own pleasures of intellectual promiscuity! And as someone who has got herself into a reasonable amount of academic trouble asking inconvenient questions, I thought it might be useful for PR practitioners and academics of the future to have access to a text which encouraged their curiosity and rebelliousness to combat the death knells of consensus and apathy.

I was tremendously aware, when writing this book, of the substantial volumes on offer that introduce the public relations student to the field. I see this book as a useful complement to such texts in offering a critical and eclectic view. I have tried to avoid an unduly polemic approach but to provide, nevertheless, a cornucopia of ideas. I was keen to try to write for a different audience and to write in the textbook genre, and I hope that my divergent approach to the topic creates some classroom debate and that students and lecturers alike find the book accessible, engaging, quirky and fun!

The book begins with an introduction to critical thinking and shows how this is relevant to public relations theory and practice. It also introduces a version of the public relations discipline's family tree!

Chapter 2 is the most substantial chapter in the book and covers a breadth of issues, including: basic definitions of public relations and public relations work in practice; public relations processes; public relations as a professionalizing occupation; and the connections between PR, 'psyops' and propaganda. In this chapter I critique public relations evaluation practice; the notion of 'strategy',and dominant interpretations of PR history.

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page x

Chapter 3 links the formation of organizational reputation to that of the individual, drawing on psychological, psychoanalytic and impression management sources and making reference to personal image consultancy.

Chapter 4 begins with a brief explanation and critique of the systems metaphor and its use in public relations theory to understand environments, issues and publics. The role of issues management as surveillance is explored in terms of societal implications. The chapter unpacks the concept of risk and the professionalization of risk knowledge and management in relation to PR. Finally, the chapter critically reviews debates on business ethics and corporate social responsibility.

Chapter 5 explains approaches to and definitions of 'public', 'stakeholder', 'public affairs', 'public sphere', 'political communication', 'lobbying' and 'public opinion', and the relevance of these concepts to PR. The work of critical PR academics is highlighted in relation to the process of defining publics and how this affects the relationship between an organization and its publics.

Chapter 6 provides a succinct summary of key media theories and explains their relevance to PR practice. It considers journalism as a professional practice and presents journalism and media studies accounts of PR practice with the intention of contributing to PR students' and practitioners' own self-understanding.

Chapter 7 reviews a challenging field that is subject to the forces of globalization, economics and politics. The main focus is on large-scale health campaigns and the contrast between social change approaches and those based on individual change. Key psychological terms are defined and the limits of psychology to underpin campaigns of persuasion noted.

Chapter 8 reviews managerial thought, highlighting those aspects which relate to public relations. Use is made of critical management theory to show how there is room for more critique within the field of public relations. The chapter includes discussion of management gurus and makes reference to the 'creative industries'.

Chapter 9 explains the field and its development, its relevance to PR and the challenges entailed in trying to analyze organizational thought. A critical postmodern view is presented of organizational culture and a range of issues is discussed, such as emotion and punishment. Finally, there is a critical review of the process of 'communication audit'.

Chapter 10 discusses the cultural model of public relations introduced by critical PR theorists. The chapter considers 'PR in everyday life' and how such an approach might add to the understanding of the role of PR in society. Also, what this approach might mean for future analysis of PR in society. Finally, since celebrity is a feature of promotional culture, there is a brief review of the this concept linked to a consideration of public relations as an occupational culture with its own stars and fame academy.

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page xi

Chapter 11 reviews ideas about globalization and considers its relevance to PR theory and practice. The chapter suggests that PR has benefited from globalization as well as contributing to its development. The chapter includes a discussion of the diplomatic role played by public relations in a globalized world.

Chapter 12 begins with a selective review of the paradigms in the field, highlighting some key contributors to diversity. It lays out the dominant paradigm and explains a variety of different theoretical approaches to thinking about public relations. The chapter complements the first chapter in the book in its promotion of the critical paradigm.

What this book is not

This book does not teach the administrative logistics or *technic* of public relations, although it discusses its *praxis*.

Textbooks are usually seen as presenting standardized knowledge in the field as Magda Pieczka pointed out:

> A textbook is firmly associated with the establishment, in the sense of representing the views central to the field and containing an up-to-date body of knowledge. … [It] serves as a medium through which the direction of the development of the field is reaffirmed, and also functions as a mechanism for self-perpetuation (Pieczka, 1996b: 143; 2006c: 347)

I hope this 'textbook' will not only introduce readers to the PR establishment but also to its dis-establishment. Rock on!

Jacquie L'Etang
December 2006

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page xii

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It has been a lifetime ambition of mine to be published by Sage and I feel very fortunate to have been given that opportunity. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of the proposal whose points I have tried to take on board.

My work is the product of the education I've received, the people I've worked with, and my friends from many walks of life with whom I've debated issues bearing on communications in our contemporary world. I owe particular debts to my friends Magda Pieczka and Heike Puchan, with whom I worked very happily for 17 and 10 years respectively. They both shaped my ideas and teaching very greatly and they are therefore silent contributors to this volume (although they canno't be held responsible for any weaknesses). In particular, Magda shaped my thinking on systems, public opinion, content analysis, media environment, professionalism, professionalization, management gurus and

L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page xiii

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L'etang-3625-Prelims.qxd 9/17/2007 6:43 PM Page xiv