

Betteke Van Ruler, Iekje Smit, Øyvind Ihlen, and Stefania Romenti, **How Strategic Communication Shapes Value and Innovation in Society (Advances in Public Relations and Communication Management)**, 2017, Bingley, UK: Emerald, 208 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover).

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As an intellectual field, public relations is still developing. Unlike its sister fields of communication management, marketing, and consumer research, the academic side of public relations still lags a bit behind in terms of intellectual heft. Currently, the American field of public relations is institutionally underdeveloped with only a few journals, weak impact factors, and scant schools and PhD programs to craft and spread its research. Although I am not native to the field, as a recent implant I have gained a strong interest in it and that is why I was excited to read *How Strategic Communication Shapes Value and Innovation in Society*, an edited volume by four European scholars, Betteke Van Ruler, Iekje Smit, Øyvind Ihlen, and Stefania Romenti. The book is a part of Emerald's Advances in Public Relations and Communication Management series, published in cooperation with the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA). EUPRERA, a 60-year-old organization, has as its mission the goal of building a stronger conceptual and theoretical foundation for public relations related communication management scholarship across Europe through running an annual congress, sponsoring research projects, and facilitating networking among its members. With a publication like this, it also contributes to a global academic dialog about theory and practice in this still-emerging field.



The book is a collection of papers presented at the 2016 EUPRERA Congress, held in Groningen, The Netherlands, with the theme summoning "Let's talk society!" The goal was a broad one: to analyze the influence of public relations and strategic communication across societal themes and in everyday life. These themes cut across a range of academic fields, including communication, marketing, and public relations, and their emphasis on Europe will make them especially applicable to those who reside on that continent. However, although most of the chapters in the book are embedded in their national contexts, the wide range of topics and methods, alongside the deep use of social science theories, draws us beyond specific geographies and makes this a thoroughly thought-provoking and useful book for those who are interested in public relations and strategic communications topics such as those pertaining to crisis communication, reputation, and the professional and academic fields themselves.

The book is organized into three general clusters. The first is centered roughly around what the book's editors call "skills and competencies," and which also intimately involves the connections between the communication profession and the education and organizational learning systems that feed into it. Among this cluster is a chapter that applies a Bourdieusian habitus framework in order to understand how the university system in the United Kingdom readies recent public relations course graduates for the world

of practice. The next chapter peers into a Dutch communication studies school (Ede University) to introduce and examine a new curriculum aimed at enabling students to adopt a more decentralized, agile, and business-flavored approach in their dialogs with publics. The third chapter in this educational cluster presents research about the organizational decision-making skills and competencies of Finnish communication professionals. Like many of the contributions to the volume, this chapter offers the reader a few pleasant surprises, such as that some of the most important professional public relations skills are related to social media competencies, group-level thinking (i.e., collective, not groupthink), and building “tolerance” in the face of professional criticism.

The chapters on social media and public relations remain relevant even a few years after the volume’s publication, testament both to the fact that the world changes slower than we think and also that core communication principles remain fundamental. One cross-European chapter interviewed communication professions and used stakeholder theory to analyze the results. The chapter’s authors concluded that, although PR professionals frequently used the term “dialog” in their discourse, it was actually a major challenge for them to host genuine interaction between public relations professionals and the public using social media. Although they recognized the potential of the medium, constraints on their organizations made it difficult for them to apply what they knew they should do in their professional practices. Another chapter provided a detailed description and comparison of the social media communications of the British, French, and German national governments in 2015. The governments used social media in a way that was “formal and distant” and that might miss chances to build dialog or demonstrate transparency. These are lingering lost opportunities for governments to use social media that, even years later, I suspect are still the case. A single-chapter on public organizations then examined organizational change communication focusing on culture, employees, and management. In particular, it examined the role of public sector change communication and highlighted the importance of employee engagement and middle-management communication skills.

Other chapters in the book looked at crisis communications, one of the staple topics, if not the defining topic, of the field of public relations. After investigators found that over US\$700 million were transferred into the personal bank account of Malaysia’s prime minister, Najib Razak, his image was definitely in trouble in the country. However, in a rather disheartening foreshadowing of global events to come, the book’s only Asia-focused chapter examines the strategies that government actors used to address Razak’s reputation crisis. It revealed some familiar methods: combating the crisis by attacking the accusers and using other successful diversionary tactics. A very useful chapter provides the initial findings of a major comparative and cross-disciplinary study about how five key concepts within the combined fields of reputation and crisis management—crisis, response, reputation, actors, and contexts—have been conceptualized and applied in the public relations, public administration, and business administration scholarly disciplinary contexts. This is very interesting work particularly focused on the notion of reputation, a broad topic that touches theory and substance in many fields. The surprising finding of this extensive investigation revealed that public relations has been hesitant at best to apply the concept of reputation, presenting a real opportunity for rigorous future research. This chapter and its research might not be easily found, tucked away in this volume. But reputation scholars may find it worth searching for and checking out.

Finally, the book looks at the study of public affairs. The lone chapter in this section is a gem. It is situated in Norway and sports the mysterious title "Secrets of Public Affairs." The chapter uses Horn's and Fung's theories to pit principles of transparency against logics of political secrecy. It focuses on the use of podcasts—rather prescient considering that the chapters were mainly written in 2016. The study's results, richened with notions of proportionality, arcanum, and secretum, reveal a lot about public relations agencies' role in developing group identities. As private companies, PR agencies tend to treat their privileged insights in secretive ways.

The book's chapters provide a series of broad, Eurocentric-but-global, mainly qualitatively based examinations located at the intersection of strategic communications practices and education, organizations, social media, public organizations, crisis communication, and public affairs. Although the authors do not mention it in the book, Jenkins' notion of participatory culture is clearly relevant to many of the perspectives and conclusions that the book presents. It winds around notions of citizen engagement and social media interaction, the many missing and hidden dialogues and conversations of the public relations field, its agencies, its educators, and its professionals. This emphasis on participation and the way it threads through these chapters make the book not only more coherent as a volume but also relevant to today's strategic communication challenges—in theory and in practice.

Another thing worth emphasizing as important is the volume's transnational context. As a North American who often reads American literature and research on these topics, I find the European extension useful and expansive. The culture of each European (and one Asian) country and its practitioners and authors definitely come out in the chapters. For example, I enjoyed the rather revealing way the Finnish professionals emphasizes their own reactions to criticism as "tolerance," or the manner in which the Norwegian scholars embraced and reveled in the sense of mystery and secrecy that pervade the entire public relations profession (which has been shrouded in controversy and myth-making since its inception). We are lucky to have such a broad range of national voices all published in an accessible, English-language book.

As an edited volume, the various authors have different objectives and foci. However, the whole book hangs together well. Overall, this group of scholars is enthusiastic and cautiously optimistic about both the importance of public relations in the contemporary world and its still-unrealized potential both as a professional and an academic field. Although the book may not interest public relations and communications practitioners who are focused on shorter-term financial results, it makes a useful and rigorous addition to the field of public relations research. Scholars who are interested in the role of public relations in the world today may find useful ideas and inspiration from engaging with the rich set of chapters in this book.