Amber L. Hutchins and Natalie T. J. Tindall (Eds.), **Public Relations and Online Engagement: Audiences, Fandom and Influencers**, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021, 79 pp., $59.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Hannah Block
Simon Fraser University

A series of chapter-based case studies, Amber L. Hutchins' and Natalie T. J. Tindall's book, **Public Relations and Online Engagement: Audiences, Fandom and Influencers**, was researched and written at a unique crossroads—"both before and during the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic, the protests after the killing of George Floyd, and the 2020 U.S. elections" (p. 2).

The book's nine succinct chapters are dedicated to distinct contemporary cases, each providing a rich survey and analysis of the current social media environment and its social, political, economic, and cultural implications. Covering several popular communication topics including mediatization, mediated communication, capitalism and labor, communication for social change, participatory publics, and the broad conditions of unsettledness that operate in media societies, the book investigates these themes in the context of 21st-century public relations (PR).
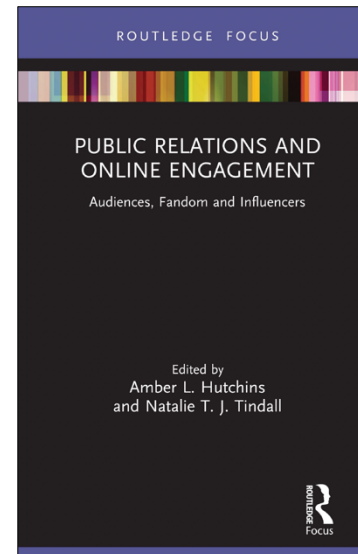
The independent yet interdependent chapters use contemporary examples to illustrate social media's omnipresent role in current events, highlighting its deep rootedness in society. Written with a PR lens, Hutchins' and Tindall's book has practical applications beyond modern-day communication studies and practices—to societal contexts and global fields. The editors illustrate how companies, organizations, government agencies, politicians, and celebrities leverage social media for success.

Through the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #BlackoutTuesday, "Chapter 1: From Slacktivism to Activism: Rihanna and Fenty Brands 'Pull Up'" investigates the passive practice of slacktivism and the catalytic role hashtags play in social movements. The chapter's author, Candice Edrington, acknowledges the importance of timing in social (media) movements. In this case, she notes:

> As the world paused due to the global pandemic . . . with stay-at-home orders in place, we were all constantly tuned in to news sources for the latest on the coronavirus. What we didn't expect, however, was exposure to another pandemic, racial injustice. (p. 5)

This parallel development unintentionally exposed the global inequalities and inequities controlling society, accelerated due to increased social media adoption during this unprecedented time.

Although the widespread practice of slacktivism has an inherently negative connotation, "there are some advantages . . . When organizations or celebrities participate in slacktivism, it can expose new

audiences to the cause" (p. 8). Edrington exemplifies this through the case of Rhianna and her Fenty brands, which advocate for inclusivity, diversity, and cultural inclusion, consequently introducing their audiences to systemic social inequalities and inequities. Building on the findings presented in the first chapter, "Chapter 2: Saving Wynonna Earp: The Power of Fandom" explores the collective power of online communities and fans/fandoms while touching on underlying themes of intersectionality and possibility—elements enabled by social media, its highly integrated network of connections, and the heightened state of visibility it creates. In the case of Wynonna Earp and the #fightforwynonna hashtag, this took the form of "constant interactions between the cast and crew and the fans" (p. 17), with credit to the show's loyal fanbase.

Through a qualitative review, "Chapter 3: Learning From the Best: A Review of Community Building, Audience Engagement, and Influencer Campaigns From the 2019 Cannes Lions" responds to three guiding research questions:

(1) What tactics do the 2019 Cannes Lions shortlisted campaigns use to build community?
(2) What types of co-created and user-generated content is produced in Cannes Lions shortlisted campaigns?
(3) Among the entry categories that recognize campaigns with influencers, who are the influencers in Cannes Lions shortlisted campaigns? (p. 19)

Important for PR practitioners, responses to these questions encompass community building, engagement, and influencer tactics. Social media hashtags, co-creation, and user-generated content drive these online elements, encouraging contribution and collaboration from online users and consumers. In this way, influencer marketing has developed as a key tactic that brands rely on to generate and construct online communities, encourage brand recognition, and ultimately establish strong consumer–brand relationships. Engagement by means of user-generated content has become the foundation for successful brand campaigns, requiring strategic balance between paid and organic influencer-based user-generated content.

"Chapter 4: Influencer Strategies and Political PR: An AOC Case Analysis" builds upon the influencer marketing strategies and discussion established in Chapter 3, using the case example of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and her (personal) Instagram account. Ocasio-Cortez adopted a PR approach new to the political climate—engaging with social media as an influencer rather than a politician (p. 27). With a holistic angle, the chapter invites the reader to actively engage with and analyze Ocasio-Cortez's politically novel (and successful) PR tactics. Authors Ashley Hinck and Leslie Rasmussen recount the relationships, authenticity, and accountability Ocasio-Cortez created with her followers via three fundamental influencer strategies: "1) shows 'unofficial life behind the scenes,' 2) shares fan art, and 3) talks to and with her followers-constituents online" (p. 29). Challenging the binary division and conventional unidirectional communication (between politicians and their publics), the chapter is empowering—underscoring the potential of social media in relation to community building, communication, and ultimately professional success.

The engagement Ocasio-Cortez fostered and the community she established through her reliance on multidirectional forms of social communication leads the reader to "Chapter 5: Participatory Publics: #NASASocial Events and Fan Engagement." With a comparable initiative (i.e., PR-motivated), NASA similarly

constructed a community "through a mix of traditional and social media activities" (p. 35). Brand community, target groups, engagement, and participatory publics are examined, here, however, in the context of media relation functions (p. 35). Like Ocasio-Cortez, the NASA Social case is unique—deconstructing the standard unidirectional communication between government agencies and the public—thereby situating itself (i.e., NASA) as a popular brand by way of brand community via public participation.

NASA's unique positionality (as both government agency and public brand) consequently "fosters a sense of moral responsibility" for participatory publics (p. 38). This sense of responsibility segues to Elaine Venter's "Chapter 7: Multinational Corporate Social Responsibility and Diversity: Blizzard Entertainment's Overwatch, the Overwatch League, and LGBTQ Pride Month" and Jessalynn Strauss's and Kathleen Stansberry's "Chapter 8: Engaging Audiences with Authenticity: The Role of Social Media in Royal Caribbean's Hurricane Relief Effort." These chapters consider moral consciousness and (social) responsibility in online environments. For Overwatch, this involved an inclusivity strategy that included the introduction of LGBTQ heroes; however, balancing corporate social responsibility efforts with their bottom line persists as an ongoing challenge. In the case of Royal Caribbean, the cruise line garnered unsolicited recognition through innocent humanitarian efforts.

Ensuring a thorough review, "Chapter 6: How Hashtag Activism and Community Upended R. Kelly's Traditional Litigation Public Relations Push" explores this specific form of Internet-based activism. In her chapter, Tindall describes the functional role of hashtags in the context of R. Kelly's legal case—illustrating their far-reaching capabilities and "disruptive capacity" (p. 48)—a key takeaway for PR practitioners.

The closing chapter—"Chapter 9: A Virus and Viral Content: The Vietnam Government's Use of TikTok for Public Health Messages During the COVID-19 Pandemic"—serves as a culmination of the book's individualized chapters, as author Kylie P. Torres reviews current information diffusion practices. Here, Torres "examine[s] Vietnam's use of TikTok as a tool to spread health messages during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Structural Virality of Online Diffusion, and why this is important for public relations strategies" (p. 70). Using the newly developed social media platform as a primary communication tool during a worldwide pandemic emphasizes the shift and ongoing development of communication strategies. With online virality now "comparable to word of mouth advertising" (p. 71), social media (e.g., TikTok) has proven vital in times of crisis. Algorithmic power and influence can be considered here—operating below the subconscious in today's media-laden and technologically reliant society (Bucher, 2017). The innately determining nature of the algorithm controls and affects the diffusion of information.

Brief, tangible, and engaging, *Public Relations and Online Engagement: Audiences, Fandom and Influencers* illustrates well the sheer power and complex integration of social media in modern-day society. The book successfully surveys the vast communications landscape through chapter-based case studies, positively contributing to the field's current literature, offering the reader a concise yet comprehensive survey of the field. Revealing the ingrained, yet often invisible systems of power, the compilation explores the integration of social media by way of politics, government and government agencies, corporations, institutions, celebrities, fans/fandoms, and branding.

Like a highly complex system of capillaries, Hutchins' and Tindall's book illustrates the ways in which social media has become fundamentally woven through society. With this, an appreciation for their work is imperative. Whether the reader engages with each chapter as an independent work or as a collective, the nine chapters support the editors' aims, "to explore and understand highly engaged publics in a variety of social media contexts and across networks" (p. 1), thereby contributing to the ongoing development and dominant discourse of literature in the field. A necessary survey of the ever-evolving industry, the book is written to educate and inform both the citizen and PR practitioner through approachable case-based discussions and analyses.

Reference

Bucher, T. (2017). The algorithmic imaginary: Exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*(1), 30–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1154086