

Kristin Demetrious, **Public Relations, Activism, and Social Change: Speaking Up**, London, UK: Routledge, 2013, 180 pp. \$44.95 (paperback).

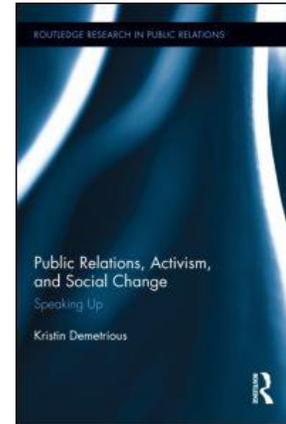
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Kristin Demetrious' book **Public Relations, Activism, and Social Change: Speaking Up** is a significant contribution to the small but growing critical communication literature on public relations. To date, most of this scholarship has focused primarily on exposing what PR historian Scott Cutlip (1994) described as the "unseen power" of PR because PR has long operated on the premise that the most effective PR is invisible PR.

Demetrious advances the movement toward greater transparency, but she does much more. Providing a wide-ranging critical analysis of the field, she cuts through the pedagogical whitewashing of the industry by academic public relations textbooks and related scholarship, which ignores the larger ideological and structural contexts in which the practice of PR is embedded. She deftly peels away the misleading democratic veneer of the jargon of PR theory and practice: terms and phrases like *stakeholders*, which falsely implies equal power and voice; PR as a *two-way street* when its goal is one-way control; and the "excellence and ethics" invoked by the currently widely influential Grunig and Hunt paradigm. As for paradigmatic excellence, Demetrious marshals formidable evidence to support her claim that the ethical breaches of the PR industry are systemic, "not accidental or unplanned" (p. 73).

To support these provocative claims, she argues that PR was initially rooted in the presuppositions of early twentieth-century market liberalism, but it is now doing the bidding of the aggressive capitalism of twenty-first-century neoliberalism by producing and reproducing a "discursive monoculture" (p. 31). Demetrious maintains that PR protects the boundaries of this monoculture by assembling and policing "a fence around the dominant discourse, the business or corporation, both to keep in the subject and to keep out new statements that might lead . . . to alternative views" (p. 30). Indeed, activists who profess alternative views are stigmatized as "hostile intruders" and when possible silenced by the PR monoculture. Increasingly, however, Demetrious maintains, new forms of activist resistance to this discursive control are gaining traction—a claim she illustrates with numerous concrete examples.

These critical moves are impressive, sometimes even dazzling, but what really distinguishes Demetrious' achievement is her theoretical ambition. She not only displays an informed and incisive insider's command of mainstream PR theory and practices, but she also reaches beyond internal analysis, imaginatively importing ideas and critical concepts drawn from the social theories of Ulrich Beck, Jurgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Manuel Castells, and others to explain the role that PR plays in late modernism and to advocate for its democratic transformation.



Her proposal for reform rests on three "pillars": (1) most prominently, Beck's concepts of "risk society," "reflexive modernization," and "sub-politics"; (2) communication theory consisting of an uneasy marriage of Habermas and Foucault on discourse ethics and power, along with the organizing potential of Castells' "networked society"; and (3) citizenship theory, the most nebulous pillar, perhaps necessarily so since the forms it may take under reflexive modernity are still emerging.

Demetrious sees Beck's theory of risk as providing a strong case for the reform of PR. Contending that PR conceives of "publics" as "commodities to be managed and manipulated," (p. 78) she sees this view as antiquated under the conditions of the risk society and reflexive modernity. To support this claim, Demetrious offers three Australian case studies in which citizen activists prevailed against global corporations and ineffectual local governments: the Werribee Residents Against Toxic Dump, the Batesford and Geelong Action Group, and the Otway Ranges Environment Network. Her interpretations of these cases are plausible and persuasive, but my internal skeptic can't quite let go of an alternative scenario whereby CEOs and their PR people do a simple cost-benefit analysis, abandon the disputes, and move their operations from Australia to the Philippines or Mexico or wherever there is no resistance. Isn't that how the logic of aggressive mobile capital works?

No Pollyanna, Demetrious, like Beck, would probably acknowledge this possibility. There are no guarantees reflexive modernity will prevail and that the world at risk will wake up. But Demetrious remains optimistic. Whether PR can be reformed remains an open question, and whether the reform Demetrious envisions would or should still fly under the flag of PR is also problematic. PR's monoculture has co-opted and spoiled so much of the everyday language of democracy: Locating reformist communication praxis under the rubric of PR seems oxymoronic. Demetrious demonstrates that the field is deeply contaminated by its own linguistic toxins. It has distinctly antidemocratic historical roots—a history eloquently documented more than a quarter of a century ago by Demetrious' fellow Australian, Alex Carey, who is curiously absent from her book.

A political activist as well as a lecturer in public relations at Deakin University, Demetrious achieves her stated intent "to bring to light a mode [of communication] that is ethical and effective and yet overlooked by activists and public relations" (p. 157). However, she does much more, significantly raising the intellectual quality, reach, and stakes of critical public relations scholarship. My criticisms pale in the light of this achievement, but as a reviewer, it is my obligation to register them.

The theoretical connections Demetrious makes are promising, but much work is still to be done to fully integrate, synthesize, and refine them into a viable, accessible, and, dare I say, testable theory that can be pragmatically applied by scholars and activists. This is not, however, the work of one book or even of one scholar. Demetrious has set a new agenda for critical PR scholarship that would dismantle "antiquated" PR; she has also positioned herself as a legitimate heir to the traditions of Habermas and Beck.

Like others working in the area of critical PR studies, however, she gets Walter Lippmann wrong, accepting Edward Bernays' theft and inversion of Lippmann's argument at face value when in fact Lippmann was an ardent critic of propaganda and considered public relations a form of censorship.

Demetrious' discussion of the limits of scientific expertise in establishing public policy is drawn directly from Beck, who is careful to spell out the complementary roles scientists and informed citizens-activists should play in policy debates. Demetrious' shorthand version is vulnerable to being misread as evincing an antisience bias. It would benefit from fuller amplification.

Demetrious' attempt to rescue and reform PR leads her to ignore or underemphasize the contributions of those who have prepared the way for her work: not just early critics such as Lippmann, John Dewey, and Carey, but also Sharon Beder, John Stauber, and Sheldon Rampton, who, in Demetrious' words, concentrate "on the failings of public relations" (p. 138). Other prominent contemporary critics of PR, for example Stuart Ewen, David Miller, and William Dinan, do not even make it into Demetrious' 11-page bibliography. Encouraging ethical forms of public communication is certainly imperative, but exposing the failings of PR—rendering corporate and state propaganda visible and accountable—remains essential critical work in a risk society. Beck (1997) does, however, provide Demetrious some support for this move: His "Trojan horse model suggests positive thinking can, under conditions of necessity, be transformative. That is, corporate lip service can actually turn green when it has to. So too, presumably, modeling ethical communication may cultivate it.

Since PR is not going away, reform-minded PR educators, like Demetrius, Kevin Moloney, Lana Rakow, Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, Jacquie L'Etang, and others may be critics' best hope for breaking through the hegemony of the PR monoculture. An essential first step in that direction involves dramatically rethinking PR education, replacing applied approaches with more broadly based communication pedagogies that are solidly grounded in liberal arts and sciences, critical thinking, and problem solving—in short, developing a pedagogy that encourages the kind of richly informed, imaginative, and incisive thinking that Demetrious displays in her book.

References

- Beck, U. (1997). *The reinvention of politics: Rethinking modernity in the global social order*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
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