

IT IS NOT JUST PR: PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SOCIETY

Mikail UĞUŞ*

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* Dr. Öğr.Üyesi, Sakarya Üniversitesi,
İletişim Fakültesi, Radyo Televizyon
ve Sinema Bölümü,
ugusmikail@gmail.com,
ORCID No: 0000-0001-7250-3369

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The public relations industry has improved during the last century. Its power of affecting people has been abused, and today public relations is being charged with gaining advantages and opportunities for the dominant powers in society. It has been used to shape people's behavior and to get them to accept the expectations and opinions of dominant power. Public relations, whose first goal is to provide the free flow of information, has produced imaginary realities by using spin and has always violated codes of ethics. Public relations is no longer the supporter of democracy because it hinders democratic movements by controlling people's ideas with misleading and manipulative messages and restricting freedom of speech, which is the keystone of democracy. In democratic societies, since governments do not apply force to change people's ideas, public relations carries much weight to control what people are thinking or doing. Today, unfortunately, public relations is assigned to legitimize elites' privileged power. Holladay and Coombs explained the deleterious effects of public relations, which change the perceptions and understandings of society from top to bottom. They criticized wrong implementations of public relations, emphasizing that these kinds of executions cause the public to misperceive public relations.

Coombs and Holladay's book, *It is Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society*, mentioned the negative connotation of the term public relations. Besides the function of dissemination of true information, public relations has

also been used to deceive the public into realizing the expectations or beliefs that powerful people or groups have. Public relations is always open to abuse because its main structure is very close to manipulation and propaganda. The first, second and third chapters focus on micro-level public relations with stakeholder and organizations. The fourth and fifth chapters bring up macro-level public relations.

In the first chapter, the authors, W.Timothy Coombs and Sherry J.Holladay, discussed common reviews of public relations, focusing on how media, popular press books and academicians criticize the practice of public relations.

From the media perspective, public relations is often equated with publicity and “public relations is portrayed as nothing more than trying to generate media coverage” (p.7). Since the term public relations is generally used inaccurately in the media, which shape people’s expectations and perceptions, people have little or no conception of what the term public relations exactly refers to. Considering the fact that “most people learn about public relations from media, not practitioners” (p.8), inaccurate media depiction of public relations practices may have a detrimental effect on people’s perception of PR.

Popular press books put forward public relations’ unethical nature, emphasizing that public relations is a tool for businesses or governments to reach their long-term objectives, ignoring public interest. For example, Stuart Ewen, in his book, *PR! A Social History of Spin* (1996), considered public relations to be equal with spin and noted that “public relations is designed to circumvent critical thinking and is rarely intended to inform the population about the intricacies of an issue” (p.10). Ewen also told that public relations is threatening democracy because it does not allow the freedom of speech, the flow of information or political pluralism to generate in society, conveying pervasive and misleading messages to the public to undermine the democratic process. Democracy refers to pluralism and equality; however, authorities do not want the public to inform about the democratic process because spreading more information means more reactions or critiques against (toward) the dominant power. Therefore, public relations should be used to advocate their policies and points of views. This reflects the unequal power relationship between senders and receivers. Normally, public relations should create a suitable environment for people to share their experiences and opinions before making a decision because “public relations is a way for people to get involved in the marketplace of ideas” (p.23). John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton, in their book(s), *Toxic Sludge is Good for You! Lies Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry* (1995), asserted that public relations is used to misguide the public. Powerful groups (businesses or governments) use public relations tools to maintain their privileged status in society and to hide unwanted information, deteriorating the content of true information by using

disinformation, manipulation, misinformation, etc. PR practitioners generally focus on affecting public opinion and changing public policies (getting public policies to change) according to their superiors' interests and needs. To accomplish this, social responsibility projects are mostly used. The public perceives that corporations are trying to do something useful and good for the benefit of society; however, their exact goals are indeed to use public relations tools to mask their secret objectives.

The authors also examined the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners. Journalists need PR practitioners' pitches, news stories, videos etc. and "this results in journalists producing news stories that actually benefit corporations rather than the public" (p.11). The public relations industry never avoids manipulating or propagandizing on behalf of elites' special interests in order to dominate society, placing their interests above the public's, and having more control over people's ideas and behavior. Public relations, unfortunately, is serving political and economic elites to actualize their dreams. The authors listed common themes in critiques of public relations:

1. "Public relations has kept the public ignorant about what really goes on in public relations" (p.14): PR practitioners use sophisticated tools to deceive the public. People are unaware of the nature of public relations activities because practitioners just send information that the public is supposed to know.
2. "Public relations cannot escape its wicked roots" (p.15): Public relations' roots are based on manipulation, and it is believed that those knowing right and wrong should guide less educated people to mitigate critiques and potential reactions against (toward) elites.
3. "Public relations is to blame for inordinate amount of power that corporations (and other groups, governments, lobbying groups) can exercise" (p.15): PR practitioners' first goal is to save elites' advantages and concerns shaping (by shaping) public opinion.
4. Public relations services are available to (or work for) those with 'deep pockets' and this undermines the democratic process (p.16): Corporations have great resources to battle for their own interests to the detriment of citizen rights and democratic rules. As long as public relations works for companies' interests, reaching a real democracy would be (is) a dream for people.
5. "Public relations' power can be curtailed (and democracy restored) if the public is educated in how to resist public relations" (p.16): True information and society-centered

activities help the public separate public relations ploys from the truth.

6. “Public relations is only publicity” (p.16): Public relations operates to increase media coverage of a business.

Popular press books not only criticize public relations but also emphasize the importance of public relations. The authors examined two books: *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR* (Ries and Ries 2002) and *Full Frontal PR: Building Buzz about Your Business, Your Product, or You* (Laermer 2004). Ries and Ries said with public relations having long-term objectives, it helps more building a strong brand than advertising, which has short-term goals. Since advertising does not have the power to change ideas, just providing consumers with quick and easily-digestible reminders; it should assist public relations activities with maintaining and representing a continuation of public relations. Even though public relations techniques are accepted to be more trust-worthy and less expensive than advertising, message control is very weak in public relations activities. Nevertheless, public relations activities are more successful to attract media attention and accumulate people’s support. Laermer concentrated on media relations in his book, equating public relations with publicity. He indicated that the importance of making news stories about a product and disseminating them would be more effective than traditional advertising techniques. Since people find advertising messages less reliable, public relations messages may be used to make a difference while building brand awareness.

Academicians defend public relations and accentuate that publicity is not a unique tool for a PR practitioner. Public relations is a process comprising research, planning, implementation and evaluation. Public relations tries to create a mutually beneficial relationship based on truth and negotiation between corporations and people, “facilitating the development and maintenance of the relationship between an organization and the public” (p.22). Here, public relations is defined as a management function. Public relations uses dialogue to create two-way communication.

There is no exact, single and widely-accepted definition for public relations. The book underlined the importance of forming a mutually beneficial relationship between corporations and the public. Organizations should attach a great importance to stakeholders’ needs and interests. “Ideas must be heard and public relations is a valuable megaphone for ideas” (p.27).

In the second chapter, the authors discussed ethical implications of public relations. PR practitioners have to send true information to the public to help them make a healthy decision. Therefore, public relations is akin to public communication, which is generally described as honest, open, loyal, respectful and forthright communication. Public communication is open to

every different kind of opinion. Different ideas are proposed, criticized, (and) evaluated, and the most logical and comprehensive ones prevail over society. Therefore, public communication is an important part of democracy because freedom of speech is appreciated in public communication.

PR practitioners may face challenges and difficulties in the course of performing public relations activities because they have to balance the needs of (the) corporation and the needs of clients. Ethical rules would be a solution to resolve dilemmas. However, most codes of ethics provide no sanction against the infringement of codes of ethics, leaving them impotent.

Practitioners should figure out clients' needs and desires and modify companies' strategies according to their interests. To accomplish this, dialogue plays a prominent role, establishing a give and take communication model to share information with the public and to take feedback from the result of actions. Therefore, ethics also is an integral part of two-way communication because it is related to listening as well as speaking.

The authors examined three ethical approaches: the teleological approach, focusing on positive outcomes of actions, the deontological approach, based on rights, obligations and duties, and the ethic of care approach, "maintaining connections and nurturing the web of relationship" (p.32). According to the authors, the ethic of care ought to be more dominant than previous ones since it is connected to interdependence, reciprocity and mutuality, which properly reflect the concept of dialogue. The ethic of care tries to strengthen the relationship between the public and corporations, focusing on the mutually beneficial relationship and understanding that can occur through true dialogue, which is best seen as an ongoing process of seeking understanding and relationship, with the potential to resolve ethical dilemmas through a mutual creation of truth. Social responsibilities are a good example of the ethic of care. Corporations normally do not have to address social and environmental issues; however, in terms of the ethic of care, organizations are reluctantly ready to implement social projects to show respect for clients' interests.

PRSA and IABC's codes of ethics stress the free flow of information, with the idea that "protecting and advancing the free flow of information is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision-making in a democratic society" (p.34). Even though it is mentioned that (the) dissemination of truthful, accurate and true information facilitate (s) to set up mutual understanding between the public and an organization, neither codes of ethics has appreciated the importance of listening to create mutual understanding. "Professionals should listen to their clients/organizations to determine how to meet their needs" (p.35). The structure of two-way communication is appropriate to the spirit of codes of ethics because it is based on speaking and well as listening. Unlike one-way communication, concentrating on persuasion,

two-way communication tries to establish mutual influence by using negotiation. It is impossible to think that two-way communication is completely neutral. It endeavors to persuade people and change attitudes and behavior, but the important point is “the selection of information, what to present and how to present” (p.37). With the modern marketing concept, clients’ needs and desires are placed above organizations’. Today’s corporations are not only simple units that supply products and services but also pay attention to what stakeholders are thinking about them. There is a growing pressure affecting organizations’ operations. They have responsibility to meet customers’ financial, social, environmental, cultural, etc. needs. Therefore, listening is a key to learn what the public is considering about organizations. Listening also offers a strong power to stakeholders, switching the place (s) of receivers with senders. “Organizations may listen to stakeholders not because they feel it is the right thing to do but because they believe stakeholders may disrupt their business operations if they do not” (p.42). Organizations might satisfy stakeholders’ demands and prevent stakeholders from boycotting by just listening, which offers an opportunity for organizations to cooperate with stakeholders and agree to find reasonable alternatives to abate tensions.

Although stakeholders have more power than before, the power of PR professionals in the corporation carries less weight for top managers. According to the book, “PR practitioners lack the significant decision-making power that undergirds management strategies” (p.43). Strategies are generally determined by top managers and PR practitioners are assigned to execute them. The role of public relations is limited to designing (design) messages and spreading (spread) information about organizations. However, when top managers face any problem, unethical difficulty or challenge, they request PR practitioners “to clean up the mess” (p.44). Despite the fact that PR practitioners do not have the power to contribute to strategic decisions, they are expected to achieve objectives determined by top managers.

The authors noted that the modern PR perspective could be a solution for PR practitioners to reach the decision-making level within an organization. From the postmodern public relations perspective, practitioners should perform like activists. They should question management, try to find out shifts in the market, pay greater attention to stakeholders, and represent the interests of external groups. PR practitioners should not be afraid of the clash of ideas and should (X) assess every problem as a new way to get at a new solution. In terms of this approach, PR practitioners have to be more active to recognize conflicts and to create (the) new ways of thinking and problem-solving methods.

In the third chapter, the authors discuss the influence of different public relations view, the issue of power and the short history of public relations. Corporate-centric of public relations has prevailed over the implementation of public relations over a long time. According to this approach,

ach, corporations have more power than stakeholders. The power that corporations had is called “power over”, the power of stakeholders is “power”. Corporations generally affect the possible action of stakeholders because organizations generally control the initiation of relationship and decide when it is supposed to get involved in relationship. However, stakeholder theory defends that different types of stakeholders may have a control over what corporations do. According to the book, there are three stakeholder groups (latent, expectant and definite stakeholders) and each group has different attributes, which are power (the ability to get companies to do something), legitimacy (stakeholders’ perception of accurate and desirable action in terms of their belief systems) and urgency (to force companies to do something as early as possible). The most effective group is definite group because they have all three dimensions. Especially after 1960s when democratic movements spread throughout the world, companies had to prioritize their stakeholders and attach great importance to their needs and desire in order to maintain its presence in the market. Furthermore, companies should satisfy stakeholders’ demands because stakeholders’ degree of harm has increased after 1990s. This harm could be material harm (a dramatic drop in revenue, a loss of financial capital, boycott) or symbolic harm (loss of reputation or social capital). Pressure from stakeholders leads organization to change, whether voluntary or involuntary. However, this change would depend on the consideration and interest of inside champions who hold the power in an organization. Activists generally use media and public agendas to force companies to change its policies, gaining more support through news releases or organizing community activities via internet to solve social problems. It is easy to say that activists have contributed public relations to improving. On the other hand, activists’ success also is linked with the fundamental shift from corporate-centric power of public relations to social issue-centric of public relations. The authors mention the history of public relations in the same chapter. We can mention four different eras. The seed of public relations was planted in the USA. The abolitionist movement and temperance activities in 1830s could be accepted as the first example of the public relations in the US. The main objective of the first activities in the first era was to fight against a negative situation, creating awareness, getting people’s attention to the issue and informing them of the danger of circumstances. The first activities might be seen as issue management because they aimed to get policy decisions to change. Public relations was used in this era to shape public opinion and create public pressure on political body. However, public relations activities to solve social problems were supported by businesses because they suffered from excessive drinking and finding enough workforces. It indicates that public relations was being abused at that time. After 1920s, public relations was mostly used by muckrakers, who investigated and revealed social, political corruption or related issues. Muckrakers extremely used media to create awareness and get people to be involved in activities. The pressure from stakeholders was assessed to get governments and businesses to modify its social policies in this second era. Business started to hire public relations practitioners to overcome communication problems. In the 1960s, called third era, community

activities were the salient side of public relations. The importance of knowing stakeholders and understanding their demand came into prominence in this term. Strategies were organized to meet stakeholders' values and goals. The implementation of public relations through second and third eras was very similar to those of public communication. Public relations tactics and techniques has been revolutionized with the developing technology, especially wide spread of using internet. In this fourth era, PR activities were executed through the internet. Besides traditional tactics, like news releases, non-traditional methods were started to use in this era, like boycotts or attacking other web sites. The flow of information was being occurred through blogs, emails, discussion boards etc. People started to benefit from the advantages and opportunities of social media to spread the word.

The influence of public relations on society is the subject of fourth chapter. Freedom of expression is the backbone of democracy in which (by which) all different ideas compete in political arena and the best idea is adopted by people. "Battles in the marketplace of ideas hinge on two dynamics, quiescence and arousal" (p.77). Quiescence refers to inactivity and lack of reaction against the dominant power. Status quo is dominant on people's ideas and there is no desire or need for change. This case is generally seen in authoritarian or totalitarian administration types. Arousal, nonetheless, attributes change and evaluation. Change depends on the clash of ideas, which is admitted as an approach to surmount problems. Public relations is a method for people to articulate their ideas in democracy. This process takes place dialogue, creating an appropriate environment for exchange of ideas. The authors explain change in a democratic society would happen by using issues management, social marketing or a combination of the two. Issue management focuses on changing public policy; on the other hand, social marketing is related to social problems as well but deals with shaping people's behavior. The main goal of issue management is to reverse negative trends to opportunities. The process of issue management is similar to that of public relations: identification, analysis, strategy, implementation and evaluation. Communication is used in issue management for creating awareness, legitimizing the issue, getting people to admit that there is a problem, and supporting for the policy proposal. "By increasing awareness and legitimacy, issue managers can influence the public agenda (what people know about the issue) and the policy agenda (what the government will act upon)" (p.84). The authors exemplify how National Resource Defense Council (NRDC) succeeded to get, a chemical substance, Alar to ban by using issue management. NDRC focused potential risk of Alar on children's' growth and linked a connection between the danger of cancer and using of Alar. It tried to get people to believe it and (to) put pressure on political body using news releases, speech of famous people, testimonies, grassroots activities, videos etc. In 1989 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had to prohibit its using in agriculture. The bottom line is that issue management works with attracting people's interest and creating awareness about the issue, getting them to accept the

issue, generating consistent messages, and finally gaining people's support. On the other hand, social marketing concentrates on shaping public behavior. "Social marketing is a process of moving people from awareness to action" (p.91). Since social marketing addresses social issues, it should understand well people's desires and needs and should not contradict them. The messages of social marketing are usually based on threat. Persuasive messages comprise fear appeal elements. Social marketing tries to get people to perceive that threat is related to their lives. To release this situation, people can accept threat or reject it to mitigate their psychological tension. In Nazi Germany, German executives wanted to forbid smoking. Even though a variety of public relations tools and regulatory tactics were used, people rejected all messages and resisted this smoking ban. The campaign was failure because it did not exactly figure out people's demands and opposed their strong desires. The authors recommend PR practitioner use direct-to-consumer (DTC) advertising, mix of social and policy changes. They express this concept by telling pharmaceutical industry. DTC is free in the US and as well as in New Zealand. DTC is a part of social marketing and issue management in this industry. DTC can create an illness and grab people's attention to this illness. DTC exaggerates illness and warns people to take urgent measures to get over the illness. Normally, people can overcome illness with life-style change or diet; however, DTC encourages people to use drugs. It creates awareness in society and force political body to modify policy, related to issue management, and tries to shape people's behavior and move them from awareness to action, connected to social marketing.

The authors discuss the global effects of public relations in the fifth chapter. Since globalization spread across the world, more and more multinational companies have appeared for the last fifty years. The function of public relations in global business is to create a suitable environment for companies to expand more. Not just businesses, governments have started to benefit from the advantages of public relations using public diplomacy, which is kind of "attempts, either public or private, to influence public opinion abroad" (p.105). The common point between public relations and public policy is their interest: to influence people and to create positive climate for powerful groups (businesses governments or powerful organizations). The main structure of public diplomacy is very close to issue management and reputation management because both of them try to get public policies to change in terms of their interests and to leave a positive image on people. Besides businesses and governments, private voluntary organizations (PVO) have been using public relations to attain their objectives. PVO is completely different NGOs and other social organizations. PVO focuses on a narrower issue "to make society better at the local, national and global level and to promote social goals" (p.109). With PVOs playing a leading role in influencing governments and the public with their actions, many corporations are willing to cooperate with them in order to find solutions for social issues. However, the exact reason behind the collaboration of corporations with PVOs is to reach their unmasked goals. For example, orga-

nizations spend remarkably high money on improving education in society because well-trained and well-informed workforces can help organizations make much more money and bringing out high-quality products. The public can perceive organizations spending money on educational problems as a socially responsible companies but organizations, in fact, realize that well-educated employees are a major key to productivity and sustainability. Corporate social responsibility activities indicate to what degree corporations are respectful to people's expectations. People's expectations have changed over years and they want companies to fulfill their social duties to ameliorate social situations. People's expectations are very important to companies because it leads them to behave ethically. Otherwise, gaps related to companies' social responsibility might be emerged in target audiences' minds against companies. Public relations is designed to define these gaps before they emerge as a potential problem, which can cause material losses (dramatic drop in profit or devaluation in stock certificate) or social losses (decrease in reputation or being labeled as a socially irresponsible company). As underlined in other chapters, listening is playing the major role in understanding people's demand. Public relations should represent stakeholders' values and make top managers adopt them as one of the corporate objectives. For example, Shell Oil is the major operator oil company in the Ogoni region of Nigeria. Shell was charged with not sharing its profit with poverty-stricken people in the region. There was a growing animosity against Shell in Ogoni and Shell ultimately had to accept to spend money on social responsibility projects. To prevent this kind of negative actions from happening again, Shell set up a discussion board on its website called "Tell Shell". Therefore, Shell gained background from people and establish early warning system to overcome potential problems.

The authors, Coombs and Holladay, put forward the negative aspect of public relations. Normally, while public relations is a tool to send true information to the public and create dialogue for freedom of speech, today, public relations is abused by powerful people or organizations (global or national large corporations, governments, organizations, etc). In my opinion, public relations is an integral part of democracy because it is a kind of way for people to explain and to share their ideas in a free environment without exposing any pressure. However, in democratic system, public relations works as one of the manipulation techniques that tries to control public opinion by offering logical reasons. Edward Bernays said in his book, *Propaganda* (1928), "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of. Vast numbers of human beings must cooperate in this manner if they are to live together as a smoothly functioning society. In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses" (Bernays, 1928, p.37). The

last studies in the field of public relations put new term “the engineering of consent”. Consent engineering is a method of getting people to persuade for the public by the public. Walter Lipmann shared the same idea with Bernays that “public opinion can be managed by a specialized class whose interests reach beyond the locality” (Edwards, 1996, p.48). The engineering of consent is necessary, not an option, for a society because less educated people should be guided by those who know what is good for them. Public relations’ power of persuasion and affecting people attract those who want to reach their objectives without disturbing the public. In totalitarian societies, powerful groups directly use propaganda and other manipulation techniques; however, democratic systems are based on suffrage and people’s consent, public relations is utilized to legitimize powerful groups interests and desires. Public relations messages are more reliable and trust-worthy; it can affect people more than other sort of communication tools. The codes of ethics can prevent the misuse of public relations. However, the codes of ethics does not have any sanction against the infringement of codes of ethics, the more PR practitioners are acting ethically, the more public relations is employed ethically. For example, in the United Kingdom, Tony Blair’s communication advisor, Alastair Campbell, was accused of deceiving and misguiding British people by producing and broadcasting intentionally misleading and manipulative news to get British people to persuade about sending soldiers to Iraq to support the USA. Alastair Campbell used all means public relations offered to him but today is it possible to say that public relations is saving its credibility and positive reputation?

Another critique against public relations with which I agree is that through social responsible project, organizations wants to emphasize being as a socially responsible corporations. The idea behind implementing a social responsibility project is to create an advantage or opportunity for organizations to make much more profit. As I stated above, social responsibility projects regarding education reflects this reality. Organizations always want to employ well-trained and well-educated people to dominate in the market. The investments in education turns for a while for companies as well-qualified workforces.

Considering the fact that the negative side of public relations is preferred more by those having power, it is not surprising that the credibility of public relations will damage in 50 years. As long as global competition is severely spreading across the world, powerful groups would like to maintain their privileged status against the public interest. I would recommend this book to everybody wanting to learn the reality of public relations behind the scene.

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