



Public Relations Theory III: In the Age of Publics,
edited by Carl H. Botan, Erich J. Sommerfeldt

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The comprehensive volume *Public Relations Theory III: In the Age of Publics*, with a subtitle emphasizing the importance of the public, was published in the spring of 2023, more than 30 years after the first book with that title (1989) and 17 years after *Public Relations Theory II* (2006). All publications are linked by the editor, Carl H. Botan, professor emeritus at George Mason University in Virginia (USA). The first two collections were co-edited by Vincent Hazleton of Radford University of Virginia (now retired), and the current one by Erich J. Sommerfeldt, a younger scholar.

As Botan states in his introduction, the task of the first *Public Relations Theory* in the late 1980s was mainly to justify that public relations – which dealt with the practice of communication and at the time drew on the achievements, theories and methods of more developed disciplines (such as rhetoric, management or psychology) – could be considered a credible area of academic research, focusing on the functions and mechanisms of communication (internal and external) of an organization, as well as the effects of communication felt by its publics. Published in 2006, *Public Relations Theory II* focused, according to Botan, on summarizing the main research perspectives in public relations formed in the 1990s, such as the theory of excellent PR (by J. Grunig) and relationship management, and also dealt with relatively new areas such as public diplomacy, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and crisis communication (whose importance has grown to the point that it is often considered a separate discipline). *PR Theory II* was still dominated by a managerial approach to public relations, subordinating communication processes to the expectations of organizations and their management and treating publics as objects of influence or dialogue, with the aim of persuading by organizations and their communication advisors. At the beginning of this century, academic public relations was mainly functionalist – that is, essentially tailored to the needs of the industry: consulting agencies, PR departments and units in corporations, government, and the third sector. Emerging voices of researchers

(e.g., Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; also the multifaceted critical trend in PR studies, embodied in the journal “Public Relations Inquiry”), calling for the detachment (or even “liberation”) of public relations theory from the demands of institutional communication practice, led to a turn in academic public relations toward humanistic, social, dialogical and audience co-creation of meaning issues. In this view, the *raison d’être* of public relations is no longer solely to serve organizations (i.e., mainly wealthy companies and institutions), but to build and consolidate specific publics, communities (including activists) and strengthen their role in public debate. Academics are raising questions not only about “what public relations does,” “when it effectively interacts with publics,” but increasingly also: “what does public relations mean for different groups,” “how does PR affect social life,” “does PR improve the quality of social ties,” “does PR help communities and environments that are overlooked or discriminated against.”

At the same time, the pro-social, critical, and meaning-making trend in public relations has not replaced managerial and functionalist PR research, which, as Botan states, remains most important for academics around the world, mainly in connection with the training of new PR personnel according to industry-accepted standards. An effective link between new research topics and directions and the requirements of consultants, agencies and PR departments can be issues of professional ethics, increasingly appreciated in PR education, as well as in communication practice. Besides, the call to treat public relations theory and practice as complementary rather than opposing spheres (as some representatives of both areas sometimes do, blaming each other for the lack of understanding and cooperation for the benefit of the PR industry as a whole, i.e., business, science, and education) runs through *Public Relations Theory III* in various places.

The publication consists of 30 chapters divided into four parts. The current edition is not only more extensive (546 pages in a slightly larger format) than the first (353 p.) and second (528 p.) editions but also more diverse in terms of the topics covered, backgrounds, research traditions, and cultural backgrounds of the authors and contributors. As M. Taylor noted in the final chapter, while in *Public Relations Theory* essentially all (with one exception) of the 26 authors hailed from the US, and in *Public Relations Theory II* only three worked at universities outside the US (women made up almost a third of the team), among those publishing in *Public Relations Theory III: In the Age of Publics*, the majority (60 percent) are women, with one in three employed at universities outside the US.

The first part of *Public Relations Theory III* is titled *Publics Take Center Stage* and contains eight chapters. First, the volume’s editor, C. Botan, discusses the changing understanding of the concept of “publics” in public relations theory and deals with the explanation and classification of theories emerging in the academic literature on public relations. He divides public relations theories into: instrumental (focused on achieving the goals of the organization, the public in this case is a means to organizational ends; such an approach can be described as extremely functionalist), modernist (based on the social sciences, focused on publics research for the construction of effective, persuasive messages and their positive reception) and cocreational (self-organizing or motivational, mainly in the area of publics empowerment, their equal treatment by organizations and institutions, role swapping between senders and receivers, full, open information and the formulation of messages that meet the needs of publics).

Moving on, E. Sommerfeldt and J. Iannacone in a chapter titled *A “Public” by Any Other Name: Reclaiming Publics Theory, and Liberating Publics From “OPR”* critically analyze the concept of “publics,” pointing out that they should be considered in a broader context, and not only – like managerial theories (e.g., relationship management or excellent PR) – in connection with companies or organizations. After all, publics are – in Sommerfeldt and Iannacone’s terms – the groups involved in public communication, as opposed to audiences, that is receivers of an

institution's messages and the stakeholders who influence the organization or are themselves influenced by it. Audiences and stakeholders are much less often – if ever – involved in communication processes, and their role is usually passive.

The chapter on engagement in the digital environment (mainly in social media) and its theoretical aspects was prepared by K. Johnston. In public relations research, the concept of engagement emerged in the 1990s, in connection with the issue of communication effects and the organization-public relationships (OPR). In doing so, as R. Heath points out, engagement is understood much more broadly than two-way communication, as it requires the creation of a community and its distinct discourse, as well as tools to reinforce this state. Engagement is multifaceted (individual, group, collective, civic, social) and multidimensional (cognitive, affective and behavioral), reinforced by relational communication processes, and its effects are valuable to the group or to the community.

The volume also includes a discussion of the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS), an extension of the situational theory of publics (STP). The team of authors, with the participation of J.-N. Kim, the creator (with J. Grunig) of STOPS, presents the evolution of the concept and its application in various areas, such as health communication or information and education campaigns. The authors also describe the phenomenon of cognitive retrogression, related to the spread of misinformation, which involves the search for and dissemination of information that corresponds to the conclusions expected by the public (regardless of the veracity of this information). This makes conspiracy theories and fake news popular, which can be effectively countered by the situational theory of problem solving.

This part of the publication also includes studies on network perspective in public relations research (by A. Saffer and A. Yang), cross-cultural communication in terms of PR theory (by L. Ni and B.-L. Sha), and activism in public relations on the example of a social media campaign conducted by students of a small university in the USA (by S. Madden and M. Pevac).

The next part of the book deals with *New and Revised Theories* and includes seven chapters. Among them are discussions of well-known and respected concepts – dialogic theories (by M. Kent), crisis communication as an important component of PR theory (written by W.T. Coombs and E. Tachkova), crisis communication theory in the digital environment (authors: B. Liu, Y. Jin, and L. Austin), the contingency theory of strategic conflict management (authors: A. Pang, Y. Jin, and G. Cameron) and the relationship of communication risk to public relations engagement (T. Sellnow, D. Sellnow, B. Johansson, D. Lane, and M. Seeger). Two European researchers, L. Edwards and Ø. Ihlen, present the relationship between social theory and public relations in a chapter that is – largely – a summary of the monograph *Public Relations and Social Theory. Key Figures, Concepts, and Developments* (Ihlen & Fredrikssen, 2018). An important addition to this part of the monograph is a study by H. Nothhaft and A. Zerfass with the telling title *Public Relations in a Postdisciplinary World: On the Possibility of Establishing a Constitutive Theory Within the Tribal Struggles of Communication Disciplines*. The authors start from the premise that public relations and related fields, such as integrated marketing communications, corporate communications, strategic, organizational, or digital communications, have not emerged as internally and intellectually coherent projects but rather as “*de facto* disciplines” (according to S. Waisbord’s term), which are not defined by a common object and research questions, but rather by administrative institutionalization. For public relations, the basis of institutionalization is a community of PR scholars, practitioners, and teachers, whose core competency is to serve an attractive niche in the labor market through academic activities, courses, and other forms of training. The long-standing efforts of scholars

to give public relations the status of a respected scientific discipline have not yet had the desired effect because, as bibliometric analyses and interdisciplinary reviews prove, it is difficult to identify the real impact of PR literature on, for example, management, economics or rhetoric (if only in citation networks), while the impact of these disciplines on PR theorists has remained significant for decades. Therefore, it would be better for public relations science to come to terms with its applied (practical) nature, which would mean strengthening its relationship with the PR industry and education, giving this relationship a more “field laboratory” character, in which PR theories must show their applicability, or at least – find resonance among PR adepts and professionals. Nothhaft and Zerfass also argue that public relations researchers should not waste energy on debates about identity or demarcation with other disciplines, and instead of entering the field of, say, sociology or economics, they should focus on presenting arguments more effectively, identifying problems and conducting public debates. After all, PR researchers will never be better sociologists or economists than representatives of these disciplines, and they can only gain recognition by presenting the usefulness of PR strategies and tools in interdisciplinary (or, rather, post-disciplinary) teams. Finally, PR scholars should, according to Nothhaft and Zerfass, formulate a research agenda that takes into account the strengths of the field – i.e., issues of integrity, truth, argumentation in complex undertakings and actions of organizations, undertaken towards different groups, usually in an indirect, circuitous way, using diverse tools and communication techniques. With this approach, Nothhaft and Zerfass believe it will be possible to conduct ideological, political, and cultural debates more productively.

The third section entitled *Race, Gender and Culture Interact With Theories* covers the following topics: feminist theories in PR (E. Toth), critical race theory, identity and their relationship to PR (N. Logan), development of PR theory in China (Y.R. Chen, C.F. Hung-Baesecke and Y. Cheng), cultural and dialogic theory of PR in the Middle Eastern context (G. Dhanesh, R. Avidar), the European school in PR theory (Ch. Valentini, V. Luoma-aho), postcolonial themes in PR theory in Latin America (J.-C. Molleda, A.-M. Suarez-Monsalve), the community approach to public relations theory and the so-called Ubuntu model in sub-Saharan Africa (F. Ngongo and A. Klyueva).

The fourth section, entitled *Applications of Theory*, includes references to well-known concepts such as relationship management (E.-Y. Ki, Y.-H. Huang, and T. Ertem-Eray), strategic management of issues from a rhetorical perspective (D. Waymier and R. Heath) or the evolution of ethics in PR theory (S. Bowen). A chapter on health communication theory was written by S. Aghazadeh and L. Aldoory. Media relations in the digital age were discussed by X. Lan and S. Kiouisis, and models of social media use by corporations were examined by A. Zhou and L.R. Men. Some novelty compared to previous books on PR theory (e.g., Brunner, 2019; Valentini, 2021) was the inclusion of the topics of character assassination and cancel culture, which was dealt with by S. Samoilenko and J. Jasper. According to them, the strategy of discrediting individuals, groups or institutions, or even countries (character assassination) and fighting ideological opponents by depriving them of a forum, silencing or destructing their reputation (canceling) is increasingly popular among Internet activists of various orientations (mainly liberal, but also conservative), as well as by hackers acting on behalf of dictatorial regimes (such as Russia, Iran or North Korea). Exposing and understanding these mechanisms is fundamental to managing risks, problems, crisis communication, and effective campaigns to combat disinformation.

The book was summarized by M. Taylor, whose mentor and doctoral supervisor was C. Botan, and whose mentee and doctoral student was the second editor, E. Sommerfeldt. She noted that the authors include representatives of four generations of PR researchers, and the most distinguished

scholars (such as L. Aldoory, C. Botan, R. Heath, and E. Toth) continue to contribute to PR theory. Scholars from Europe, such as A. Zerfass, D. Vercic, C. Valentini, L. Edwards, V. Luomaho, and Ø. Ihlen, have become a major force in the PR academic disputes. So far, no one from Polish universities has joined this elite, albeit niche, group, but it is hoped that the next volume of *Public Relations Theory IV* will feature a more visible Polish trait.

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