
Journal of Professional Communication **jpc**

Old ideas redux

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ARTICLE INFO

Article Type:
Book Review

Article History:
Received: 2011-05-04
Revised: 2011-07-18
Accepted: 2011-08-01

Key Words:
Brian Solis
Deirdre Breakenridge
Social Media
Public Relations

ABSTRACT

This critical book review of *Putting the Public Back in Public Relations* (Pearson Education, 2009, 352 pages) examines how social media is transforming the practice of public relations. The author highlights several strengths of the book, mostly in relation to marketing, but criticizes the lack of theoretical background, particularly the absence of a discussion of two-way symmetrical communication, as put forward by Grunig.

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In the rapidly evolving world of social media, keeping up is a challenge even for the most savvy. Authors who tackle the subject run the risk of obsolescence long before their work is published, and to retain any relevancy years later is unlikely at best. For every book like *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (Levine, Locke, Searls & Weinberger, 2000), there are hundreds of others that litter the social media graveyard. So one has to give Brian Solis and Deirdre Breakenridge credit. Indeed, two years and five reprints later, *Putting the Public Back in Public Relations* continues to garner praise, landing on its share of post-secondary reading lists.

Their purpose - to educate and better prepare practitioners to engage with the public in a landscape redefined by social media - is noble and relevant. Social media has altered the flow of information, which means that the general public, once reliant on traditional media to filter and disseminate information, has become empowered to create, curate and share what it deems important. This creates a number of challenges for public relations, but it also, according to the authors, provides an opportunity for social media to prove its value,

dispel its negative reputation and become “one of the most powerful marketing disciplines” (p. 8).

It is from this early point in the book that public relations professionals may begin to feel disaffected. References to public relations as marketing – and particularly to principles of direct marketing – persist, raising doubt about the authors’ own definition of the industry. Readers are addressed as if familiar only with broadcasting persuasive messages, and as though fostering relationships were a foreign concept to them. This makes the snappy title begin to feel like a gimmicky headline used only to attract a wider audience, rather than a real redefinition of the field of public relations as it is currently practiced by professionals.

To reach the stature of “most powerful”, the authors prescribe “PR 2.0”, a term coined by Solis in the 1990s. “PR 2.0” underscores the individual vs. the masses and emphasizes the importance of building and maintaining relationships. It is not about tools, which will change over time, but going where your stakeholders are and listening, collaborating and sharing. The emphasis is on socializing media and humanizing the brand or, in other words, incorporating Solis’ “PR 2.0” mindset. “PR 2.0” is about relationships, evolving “from pitching to participating, from selling a story to telling a story” (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009, p. 74). And true engagement is not about what you can get, but how you can help your audience.

That these sentiments are commonly echoed throughout the online community and have become the mantra for social media regulars shows Solis deserves due credit for his early evangelism.

However, to anyone familiar with public relations theory, these principles are hardly novel. Even Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee, whom the authors reference in an attempt to ground the book in some historical context, might argue that understanding an audience is vital to resonating with it. What the authors most obviously miss is the near century of public relations thought development, from Bernays and Lee, leading up to the social media era.

In the midst of that omission stands James Grunig, who introduced his four models of communications in the early 1980s, including the “ethical” or “excellence” model of two-way symmetrical communication, based on open, honest and adaptive communications, the goal of which is to build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders. While the tools have changed – Grunig developed the models long before the dawn of social media – the principles are remarkably similar. Only the footnotes are absent, indicating Solis and Breakenridge didn’t know or care to do their homework.

And it is that lack of grounding in history and scholarship that is proving to be the most serious lacuna in *Putting the Public Back in Public Relations*.

Throughout the book, the authors reiterate a number of key points: understand your audience, know what it is you represent, engage in conversation

and avoid broadcasting, tailor your message and measure success. (Note: both audience and message are terms they believe should be stricken from the public relations vernacular). Again, for anyone immersed in public relations, these are familiar concepts frequently taught and applied in communication planning. Notably, what Solis and Breakenridge spend a considerable amount of time on is the conversation piece, with little on any of the other factors that enter into a good public relations campaign. Their examples are too often grounded in interesting, yet anecdotal personal experience. Simply put, there is a serious lack of unique research or quantifiable results.

Who the authors do reference is perhaps more telling than whom they do not. From the opening endorsement from Guy Kawasaki, former chief “evangelist” for Apple, followed by a steady stream of social media experts, one wonders if the book’s doggedness has more to do with the authors’ connections than its content. While the list of experts does add a variety of experience to the mix, readers unfamiliar with social media may question the relevance of these inclusions. In that sense, the authors missed an opportunity to connect.

Some of the most valuable content comes in Part II, entitled “Facilitating Conversations: New Techniques and Tools.” In the chapter entitled “Become the person you’re trying to reach...” (p. 92) they suggest that you listen and learn about communities first to understand social forces that shape attitudes and behaviours. It is here that Solis and Breakenridge are at their best, explaining new media tools, including search engine optimization (SEO), social media releases (SMRs) and video news releases (VNRs), and their appropriateness for various audiences. Students and social media novices will find useful tips to support symmetrical dialogue, build trust and foster relationships online. This tactical approach may also be of interest to senior professionals, whose understanding of the social media landscape is an increasingly important part of communication strategy. Readers would be hard pressed to find this sort of insight in traditional textbooks.

The question that remains, however, is whether *Putting the Public Back in Public Relations* is appropriate for novices and students learning the craft. The short answer is no. While there are tactical lessons to be learned, most of what Solis and Breakenridge propose is readily available online, perhaps, in part, as a result of Solis’ previous offerings. What remains is familiar, often borrowing from established research and repackaging it through the lens of social media. The lack of unique research or references to established research, coupled with a distinct focus on marketers who have not valued relationships with their constituencies in the same way public relations practitioners have, result in a book that turns the proverbial clock back on public relations practice. We are still waiting for a social media book for the practitioner that builds upon the research traditions of public relations theory and practice, rather than reinventing the wheel, or seeking answers in connected disciplines such as marketing.

Solis and Breakenridge say it best themselves: "It's the art of marketing without marketing" (2009, p. 46).

References

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