Book Review

*Culture and Public Relations: Links and Implications.*
By K Sriramesh, K & D Vercic, (Eds.) 2012 New York: Routledge

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Public relations scholars are finally getting it. Culture and public relations have belatedly reached the forefront of public relations inquiry. While there have been numerous books that covered international and/or global public relations, the focus had been on domestic practices of countries outside the United States as Wakefield had previously argued (XXXX). Articles on culture have been rather sporadic. An exception to this is Stephen Banks’ seminal book in 1995 (and a second edition in 2000) on *Multicultural Public Relations: A Social Interpretive Approach*, which did not seem to resonate with other scholars nor generate much discussion.

But over the last four years, four books focusing on public relations and culture were published. These are: Curtin & Gaither (2008) *International Public Relations: Negotiating Culture, Identity, and Power*; Bardhan & Weaver (2011) *Public Relations in Global Cultural Contexts*; Edwards & Hodges (2011) *Public Relations, Society and Culture*, and this current volume of works by Sriramesh and Vercic.

This recent edited collection brings together various contributions and perspectives on culture and public relations by leading scholars from different parts of the globe. As Sriramesh argues, this focus on culture has largely been driven by globalization and the functionalist need for practitioners to learn about cultural practices of peoples and companies in which they operate. Clearly public relations scholarship and practice follow the trajectory of the global economy and in a way, confirm that the discipline is undeniably modernist and functionalist in its ideology.

On the other hand, as debates on globalization suggest, there are opportunities for opening up the discipline in this era of globalization. One of which is that scholars and practitioners are ‘forced’ to confront complex and challenging issues of culture in all its forms. The book attempts to address some of these challenges by framing the contributions across three themes: culture as an environment for public relations; the culture of public relations globally; and the impact on public relations on culture.

My first comment is the book’s awkward subtitle, ‘Links and Implications’. It seems to be a tautology as one expects a book entitled “Culture and Public Relations” to be about the linkages and implications of the two concepts. I also find the first line of the introductory chapter of concern. To start a book on public relations and culture with an opening line that states “Public relations is an occupation” diminishes the whole discipline of public relations. While the editors explain further that they are ‘convinced that it is also a cultural practice’, it seems to be an afterthought and positions the book as taking another functionalist approach to the study of culture and public relations.

Nevertheless, the rationale behind the book is still helpful and the contributions of scholars with their rhetorical, critical and postcolonial perspectives of public relations and culture redeem my early concerns.

While many of the contributions are repackaged arguments to fit the theme or another form of “domestic” public relations practices vis-à-vis cultural contexts, some provide new thinking in scholarship that have not otherwise been explored. One is the chapter by Motion, Haar and Leitch that draws on indigenous engagement in New Zealand to argue for public relations practice that engenders power sharing, equity and participation for mutual benefits. As more countries house diasporic communities, this chapter provides a valuable approach to working with indigenous and other marginalized communities.

The chapter on identity by Sha, Tindall & Sha emphasizes the limitations of our current approaches to audience segmentation. However it still behooves me that US population statistics still use skin color as a
demographic category. In Australia demographers use the term ‘culture and language diversity’ although they still tend to use ‘ethnicity’ as a factor to establish identity. Intersectionality is valuable in helping us understand that people have multiple identities and that their actions depend on the dominant identity at a particular point in time.

Culture is indeed a complex concept. In my view however culture is transnational and defining culture based on geographical borders is flawed. We cannot assume that one’s culture is static as people acculturate as they move jobs, move homes or migrate to other countries. Nor can we expect people to simply adopt the current ‘culture’ in which they live and discard the culture in which they were brought up. What seems to be missing in the collection is a discussion on values which I believe is a critical component of culture. Sriramesh mentioned it in his introductory chapter but the question of values, organizational, societal or human would be appropriate to put in context. I would also have like a chapter on how public relations as a social constructionist activity has deliberately or otherwise influenced the shaping of cultures. For example, events and celebrity spokespersons are now part of everyday life both in local communities to national and international organizations. How do these types of activities impact on the way we think, feel and behave? How do these ‘artifacts’ improve or hinder our progress as a nation, as a community?

The book is an excellent resource for public relations students and scholars who are interested to undertake further research in the area with its numerous suggestions for potential research questions. I know I will be looking more closely at these chapters as we further build the body of knowledge that will help us understand how cultures and public relations meaningfully interact to help us find our role in society.