Edited by
Amber L. Hutchins
and Natalie T.J. Tindall

Public Relations and
Participatory Culture

Fandom, social media and
community engagement

Routledge

As the line between content producers and consumers increasingly blurs, this book takes an important step forward in bringing theory to bear on the way we proceed as communicators. The editors of this volume have brought together a varied and intrinsically interesting set of essays on topics that illuminate this new frontier, helping light the way forward while staying grounded in the wisdom of the past.

Jessalynn Strauss, *Assistant Professor, Elon University, USA*

This is an important and very timely collection. It expertly and engagingly fuses together the fields of public relations and fan studies, resulting in, not only a much-needed interjection into current scholarship, but also, an impressive and compelling read.

Lucy Bennett, *Research Assistant, Cardiff University, UK*

Today, public relations professionals and their publics are engaged in a dance of ideas that shapes and re-imagines interaction with organizations, services, products, and causes. Hutchins and Tindall's book focuses attention on the steps of this dance and shows us how the participatory space surrounding PR is fertile ground for authentic community engagement.

Jennifer Jacobs Henderson, *Chair and Professor of Communication, Trinity University, USA*

The field of public relations benefits in a number of ways from the insights within the new book *Public Relations and Participatory Culture*. Not only do the authors embrace fan studies literature, a field that has much to contribute to PR theory development, they also examine the interaction between these engaged publics and the growing importance of online communication and online communities. I strongly recommend you read this!

Sarah H. VanSlette, *Assistant Professor, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, USA*

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Public Relations and Participatory Culture

While public relations practitioners have long focused on the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders, there has never been a time when that relationship was so dominated by public participation. The new model of multiple messages originating from multiple publics at varying levels of engagement is widely acknowledged, but not widely explored in scholarly texts.

The established model of one-way communication and message control no longer exists. Social media and an increasingly participatory culture means that fans are taking a more active role in the production and co-creation of messages, communication, and meaning. These fans have significant power in the relationship dynamic between the message, the communicator, and the larger audience, yet they have not been defined using current theory and discourse. Our existing conceptions fail to identify these active and engaged publics, let alone understand virtual communities who are highly motivated to communicate with organizations and brands.

This innovative and original research collection attempts to address this deficit by exploring these interactive, engaged publics, and open up the complexities of establishing and maintaining relationships in fan-created communities.

Amber L. Hutchins is the Robert D. Fowler Endowed Chair in Communication, Kennesaw State University, USA.

Natalie T. J. Tindall is Associate Professor, Georgia State University, USA.

Routledge New Directions in Public Relations and Communication Research
Edited by Kevin Moloney

Routledge New Directions in Public Relations and Communication Research is a new forum for the publication of books of original research in PR and related types of communication. Its remit is to publish critical and challenging responses to continuities and fractures in contemporary PR thinking and practice, and its essential yet contested role in market-orientated, capitalist, liberal democracies around the world. The series reflects the multiple and inter-disciplinary forms PR takes in a post-Grunigian world; the expanding roles which it performs, and the increasing number of countries in which it is practised.

The series will examine current trends and explore new thinking on the key questions which impact upon PR and communications including:

- Is the evolution of persuasive communications in Central and Eastern Europe, China, Latin America, Japan, the Middle East and South East Asia developing new forms or following Western models?
- What has been the impact of postmodern sociologies, cultural studies and methodologies which are often critical of the traditional, conservative role of PR in capitalist political economies, and in patriarchy, gender and ethnic roles?
- What is the impact of digital social media on politics, individual privacy and PR practice? Is new technology changing the nature of content communicated, or simply reaching bigger audiences faster? Is digital PR a cause or a consequence of political and cultural change?

Books in this series will be of interest to academics and researchers involved in these expanding fields of study, as well as students undertaking advanced studies in this area.

Public Relations and Nation Building
Influencing Israel
Margalit Toledano and David McKie

Gender and Public Relations
Critical Perspectives on Voice, Image and Identity
Edited by Christine Daymon and Kristin Demetrious

Pathways to Public Relations
Histories of Practice and Profession
Edited by Burton Saint John III, Margot Opdycke Lamme and Jacquie L'Etang

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Public Relations and Participatory Culture

Fandom, social media and community engagement

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Amber L. Hutchins and Natalie T. J. Tindall

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

Amber L. Hutchins: Dedicated to Justin, who is my sounding board and my comedic relief.

Natalie T. J. Tindall: This book is dedicated to my Words with Friends partner and listening post (my mother), my wartime consigliere (my father), and my James Bond and Trek-loving compatriot (my brother).

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Contents

List of illustrations

Figures

Tables

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Acknowledgement

Part I

Foundations

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1   Introduction

Amber L. Hutchins and Natalie T. J. Tindall

New media, especially social media, has changed the practice of public relations and challenged scholars to reconsider or reconceptualize what we consider "traditional" models and practices of PR. Experts believe that these changes will fundamentally redefine the purpose and practice of public relations, and that the future of public relations will become nothing like its past. The practice and scholarly study of public relations has evolved – and will continue to evolve – alongside technological advances, new techniques and communication channels, and new theoretical models of communication and persuasion.

As this new era of public relations – a *revolution*, as some are calling it – continues to take shape, scholars aim to reflect, understand, define, criticize, and ultimately enhance the practice of PR while also creating an intellectually rigorous area of academic study. We strive to create a balance between the two worlds. The most used definitions of public relations include the phrase "mutually-beneficial" and as PR scholars, many who have also served as practitioners, we aim for research and inquiry that is beneficial to both the professional and scholarly realms of PR. The most robust and useful research in this area creates a bridge between the scholarly and practical worlds of public relations.

The work included in this book provides closer examination of areas that are emerging as a result of participatory culture online, including fandom, social media, and community engagement.

Rethinking traditional models of publics

First, we must rethink current public relations models of *publics*. With the increasing importance of high-engagement publics in public relations efforts, practitioners are experiencing significant changes in their responsibilities and organizational roles, and the conception of the public in previous "traditional" models of PR are no longer valid across all campaigns. Traditional public relations models of publics, especially Grunig's Situational Theory of Publics (1984), define, categorize, and analyze the motivations and behaviors of publics.

Application and extensions of the Situational Theory of Publics have expanded our understanding of publics, but the research in this area is often

aimed at managing publics and predicting behavior. Excellent research in this area can yield extensive insights into reception, process and psychology of persuasive messages, but under the traditional model of "publics," organizations often ignore individuals and groups who fall outside of the traditionally defined categories of active and latent publics (who are given the full attention of practitioners and scholars).

A significant limitation in publics research is that many studies are either designed or perceived as a way to solve a problem, that is managing conflicts or crisis. The dynamic between an organization and its publics is more likely to be seen as adversarial, and the public relations practitioner's role is limited to defusing activists and agitators. This contributes to the persistent perception of public relations as reactive rather than proactive and primarily interested in "damage control."

New publics, new responsibilities

Unlike the pre-Internet public relations environment, publics now have seemingly unlimited opportunities to become engaged with organizations, content, and each other. As part of a new set of professional responsibilities that reflect the increasing emphasis of online communication, PR practitioners are charged with creating, cultivating, and managing online brand communities, as well as the more complex task of establishing and maintaining the relationships created by active, *engaged publics.*

Examining publics that are already active and engaged is a necessary step in the new public relations world of social media. The term *engaged publics* moves us a step closer, but many researchers and practitioners are still measuring engagement via hyperlink clicks or website hits, and defining results based on business objectives like ROI. A shift in focus is necessary, away from research that continues to present a limited view of online communication as comparable to multimedia or interactivity, toward more robust analysis and models of online behavior by an individual or community.

Building, maintaining, and enhancing two-way communication and relationships between organizations and publics has always been an important function of public relations, but the importance of *community management* has expanded on a global scale, as evidenced by the number of international practitioners and entrepreneurs who now list community management as a job title or specialization, and the popularity of the topic in trade publications and at professional conferences. Many who manage social media on behalf of a client or organization are de-facto online community managers who focus on building and maintaining the strength of ties between publics via social media efforts.

Public relations scholars and professional experts are only now beginning research in this area. Although there has been some work on offline community management (also known as brand communities), these studies are typically limited to marketing or cultural studies, and pre-date social media or the Internet itself. Studies of brand communities, like Belk and Tumbat's "Cult of

Macintosh" (2005), which explores the evangelical connection between brand and publics, have provided a rationale for an exploration of online community management. The recent success of the PR-driven "Fiskateers" online community has been covered extensively in trade media and professional PR blogs (Jones, 2014), indicating a significant interest in the development of research and best practices in this area.

Examining the importance of online communities in PR is a natural extension of existing research that focus on the value of community to PR. For example, Starck and Kruckeberg (2001) suggest that by adopting a model of communitarianism and taking a more active role in the community, practitioners can fully realize two-way communication efforts, while Culbertson and Chen (1996) advocate for the empowerment of all members of a community and interconnectedness. The study of individuals within these communities is usually intended to develop best practices for activating key influencers and brand advocates, who serve as opinion leaders and tastemakers.

Because of social media and the *participatory culture* of online communities, publics are taking a more active role in the production and co-creation of messages, communication, and meaning. They have significant power in the relationship dynamic between the message, the communicator, and the larger audience, yet these publics cannot be defined using current theory and discourse. As a whole, publics have more ownership on a global scale, without the limitations of physical proximity, yet our current conceptions of public do not delineate between active and super-active publics, let alone discuss engagement with information beyond processing and seeking it or dealing with publics virtually who are highly motivated to communicate with organizations and brands.

Fandom, brandfans, and transmedia

Many of the engaged publics and members of online communities that are the focus of new public relations responsibilities fit the definition of *fans*, although public relations, as a discipline, has yet to determine what that term means to our field. Although public relations sometimes supplements its theory base with insights from other disciplines like marketing or rhetoric, work that examines fan studies is largely excluded from our interdisciplinary efforts.

In leading public relations and strategic communication journals, research on fans is rare, and the attempt to connect fandom research to segmentation and other public relations theory is nonexistent. In part because of Facebook's usage of "fan," the term has increased in usage in professional and scholarly PR settings, but usually indicates membership, affinity, approval, or support for an organization. Research that explores fans and fandom on a deeper level is usually considered the domain of cultural critical media audience studies.

Fan studies scholar Mark Duffet defines a "fan" as "a self-identified enthusiast, devotee or follower of a particular media genre, text person or activity" (Duffet, 2013, p. 293). Most fan studies scholars are primarily interested in fans of media texts (entertainment), but their exploration of fannish behavior,

including community building, content creation and production, and engage-ment in fan–producer relationships, can greatly benefit public relations' foray into participatory culture and interaction with *brandfans*, who exhibit the same devotion to brands and non-media/entertainment organizations like corporate, government, and healthcare. Fans of brands and organizations also construct identity, values, and beliefs around the products and services (the "text") they love. They experience an emotional connection to each other as well as the org/producer, and they expect authentic, human connection and feel a sense of ownership in the brand, organization, or product.

Fan studies, which often considers public relations activities as part and parcel of marketing, promotions, and advertising, can also benefit from PR theory, models, and research. As fan–producer interactions increase, and the line between producers and consumers (*prosumers*) continues to blur, public relations research can help explain organization-side strategies, ethical standards, and best practices. Scholars like Henry Jenkins, whose work highlights the two-way communication between fans and organizations (2006) that has been made infinitely more robust thanks to social media, have piqued the interest of a wide range of scholars. By positioning the study of fan practices and culture within a blended context of both industry/professional (PR, marketing, and media management studies) and critical media studies, public relations and fan studies both stand to gain valuable insights from each other's discipline.

Given the similarities in behavior and attributes of engaged publics, fans, and brandfans, it's not surprising to see more interest in entertainment strategies from public relations managers and experts. Steve Rubel, Edelman's Chief Content Strategist, advises practitioners to incorporate *transmedia* (Rubel, 2010) and *drillable media* (Aufferman, 2012) – two terms with foundations in media scholarship – into strategic public relations and corporate communication efforts. Elements of transmedia, including storytelling across platforms, gamifi-cation, immersive experiences, and collective intelligence and problem-solving, are becoming integrated with public relations and strategic communication campaigns for nonprofits and corporate clients.

Transmedia is one of a number of opportunities for public relations to pro-vide leadership for organizational communication efforts. With the integration of entertainment, marketing, public relations, games, and advertising, there are new roles for professional communicators that require traditional public rela-tions techniques. Social media management, content strategy, relationship and experiential marketing rely on relationship management and two-way com-munication. As the field that has the strongest roots in these important areas, public relations needs to be at the forefront of research, management, and new techniques across professional communication.

Forward into the future of public relations

We present this book as the beginning of a conversation between PR profes-sionals and scholars, the purpose of which is to re-evaluate our discipline in the