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Book Review

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***Public Relations and Participatory Culture: Fandom, Social Media and Community Engagement*. Routledge, 2016. Edited by Amber L. Hutchins and Natalie T. J. Tindall**

Participatory culture has given public relations professionals a raft of new communication options. It has also given them a range of new dilemmas.

Amber L. Hutchins and Natalie T. J. Tindall's new book *Public Relations and Participatory Culture: Fandom, Social Media and Community Engagement* brings together a series of essays that explore these challenges.

The edited collection opens a number of dialogues between PR practitioners and researchers in relation to participatory culture: a new, but rapidly expanding, area in need of critical academic attention. It advances theory and practice in a diverse number of areas, such as brand community management, engagement with fan publics, gamification, and crisis management for social media groups. On the whole, as the editors state at the outset, the book strives to "integrate stakeholder and publics theories with those of participatory cultures and media studies/fan perspectives; to add new, fresh insight into the public relations discipline's concept of publics and segmentation; and to advance the existing theoretical framework of PR".

The changing nature of publics themselves makes the volume extremely timely. As Hutchins and Tindall rightly state, "we must rethink current public relations models of publics". Previous models are no longer universally valid, with the editors explaining that: "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."

In particular, they comment, the field of public relations has not yet fully come to terms with fans. It has not effectively conceptualised fans in PR terms, and has not yet developed approaches to engage successfully in different contexts with these extremely diverse publics. As such, unsurprisingly, most of the book is dedicated to developing new insights in this area.

The collection is made up of 20 chapters, written by 30 authors. The scholarly contributions aim to help answer a very applied overarching question: "How, as practitioners, can we create meaningful, ethical, and mutually beneficial relationships between brands/organizations and fans?"

While all of the chapters present very thoughtful and engaging research, thinking and recommendations in their own ways, and provide stimulating responses to the book's overarching question, several contributions stand out.

One of these is Sam Ford's chapter 'Public relations and the attempt to avoid truly relating to our publics'. The author's perceptive analysis sharply distinguishes between publics and audiences: between, on the one hand, active groups of communicators and, on the other hand, individuals who have long been defined in scholarship as the product of broadcasters' (and other mass media outlets') linear communication approaches. As Ford points out, PR practitioners have tried to "hang onto the logics of the broadcast world", engaging with audiences but failing to engage with publics. This approach is reaching its use-by date. He astutely advises practitioners to be "listeners more than orators; ombudsmen for what publics want and need from the company rather than agents for aligning publics with the corporate POV; and strategic advocates for how a company should change its logics to be true participants in today's communication reality".

Another standout chapter is 'Gearing toward excellence in corporate social media communications', by Linjuan Rita Men and Wan-Hsiu Sunny Tsai. The authors provide a robust review of best practices in public relations with respect to social media. Although the idea of 'excellence' is barely discussed, the chapter ends with six useful, practical points that organisations can implement in moving towards best practice in corporate social media communications.

Amanda K. Kehrberg and Meta G. Carstarphen's chapter 'What's at stake in the fan sphere?' also effectively examines the benefits and pitfalls of engaging with fans, especially in crisis situations. Focusing on Skittles (a world leader in participatory, and particularly youth-oriented, communication), the authors explain how the confectionary company mishandled the Trayvon Martin affair in the United States in 2012. They warn corporations against profiting from activism (or appearing to do so), explain how organisations' symbolic assets can be "easily hijacked and reimagined" by online publics, and argue that fans can be both inspirational brand advocates and, more problematically, emotional stakeholders who may expect returns on their affective investments.

The book abounds in such detailed case studies and examples, in addition to discussing many of the latest trends and theories relating to public relations, participatory culture and, more broadly, media. For instance, in their chapter 'New media, new media relations', Amber L. Hutchins and Natalie T. J. Tindall discuss practitioners such as 'accidental journalists' and 'participatory journalists', as well as phenomena including 'media pitching' and 'media catching'.

If there is one key observation that emerges from the book's wide range of chapters, it is that organisations, across the board, do not engage in effective online dialogic communication with their publics, especially fan publics. Many also do not know how to do so. Creating truly interactive relationships in online spaces is time-consuming, labour-intensive and, quite simply, hard. The diverse numbers, sizes and interests of publics

makes crafting successful messages, and building fruitful relationships, more challenging than ever before.

The book's authors, collectively, clearly identify and explain the shortcomings in a range of existing practices and scholarship. Although the volume is not a troubleshooting guide, it does offer a range of potential solutions to the problems it identifies. Where strategies and tactics are not explicitly offered, the chapters raise vital issues of which professionals and researchers need to be aware.

Readers from non-academic backgrounds may find the writing challenging at times. Some of the chapters feature elements like formal research questions and hypotheses, as well as explanations of research methods, making them quite technical. In this respect, Justin A. Walden's chapter 'Structuration and fan communities in sport' – an interesting discussion of organisations' engagement with sport fandom – mainly builds an outline for future research.

The book is also slightly repetitious in places. For instance, fans are (unnecessarily) defined in several chapters. The final contribution – Jimmy Sanderson and Karen Freberg's 'When going silent may be more productive', which offers a thought-provoking case study of the 2014 Ray Rice press conference debacle – needlessly iterates or re-explains key ideas. The book, as a whole, may also have benefited from a final chapter, a conclusion, to draw together all of its varied threads.

Nevertheless, *Public Relations and Participatory Culture* offers detailed and diverse accounts of some of the key problems confronting PR practitioners in their efforts to engage with online publics, especially fans. It captures the many advances that PR professionals have made in this area, while highlighting just how many more they still need to make.