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Rethinking Public Relations. Persuasion, Democracy and Society

Item Type	Other
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Citation	Robertson, C. (2020). Rethinking public relations. Persuasion, democracy and society. [Review of the book, Rethinking public relations. Persuasion, democracy and society by Kevin Moloney & Conor McGrath]. Journal of Public Affairs, 20(3), 1-2. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2181
Publisher	Wiley
Journal	Journal of Public Affairs
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-05-17 12:35:40
Item License	http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10034/624010

Book review

Rethinking Public Relations. Persuasion, Democracy and Society.

By Kevin Moloney and Conor McGrath: Routledge, 2020. 194 pages. Hardback. £36.99.
ISBN: 9780367313005

In this book, the authors provide an excellent third edition that reiterates messages from previous work (2000, 2006) yet, augments these arguments by considering new avenues of public relations (PR) and its contribution to liberal democracies. Firstly, the authors justify their locus by situating their research through an evaluative, literature-led lens that continues the argument from previous editions that PR is ‘weak propaganda.’

This ‘weak propaganda’ provides challenges and benefits to democracy, with the authors determining this ‘weak propaganda’ in relation to PR from a neutral, probing lens. Expanding upon previous editions, the authors consider not just the structural components of PR but also introduce its rhetorical components, and how rhetorical strategies affect notions such as CSR, stakeholder relationships and the quintessentially symbiotic press-PR relationship.

Furthermore, the authors expand by exploring the role of digital and social media (DSM’s) for the first time. Whilst potentially democratically troubling, the authors argue that the utilisation of DSM’s could reconfigure traditional power relationships and provide the opportunity for non-elites to conduct effective PR, such as through digital activism and bottom-up agenda-setting.

The authors also address pertinent questions surrounding the democratic legitimacy of PR. It is asserted that PR “is instrumental not idealistic...and so reduces trust creation” (Moloney & McGrath, 2020, p. 22), and is widely viewed pejoratively, with the authors providing a critically balanced lens into tensions of PR in relation to democracy. Expanding upon previous editions, the authors situate PR in relation to rhetoric and persuasive communication, whether this can be ethical, what the democratic implications of ‘weak propaganda’ and persuasive communication are, and how this affects elite discourses within society. Important questions are raised, with the conclusion offering recommendations of how PR can be ameliorated, which is particularly pertinent given that “public relations will likely become more pervasive in the future, not less” (Moloney & McGrath, 2020, p. 147).

Over the book’s 9 chapters, important questions across business, communications, and journalism are raised that further understanding as to how PR impacts upon democracy, how PR has transformed in the age of ‘fake news’, ‘churnalism’, and DSM’s, alongside recommendations for how PR can be reconfigured to prevent democratic deficiencies. Written clearly and concisely, the authors conclude by determining that a ‘Niagara’ of persuasive communications could hamper democratic norms, whilst PR can also be determined as “the ‘voice’ of policy pluralism...[PR] is expressed by competing interests in a liberal democracy” (Moloney & McGrath, 2020, p. 128). Here, the authors suggest reform of the PR industry to prevent further deprecatory perceptions of PR and highlight its democratic potential. By determining that PR should become more transparent, audiences should be trained to recognise PR, and journalism should re-embrace its watchdog function and reject ‘PR-isation’, the authors discern through these mechanisms, PR could enact a more democratically efficacious function.

The preliminary strength of this text is its excellent readability and utilisation of case-studies which are appropriated to rigorously evaluate complex topics, yet, is written accessibly so that undergraduates but also experts can benefit from reading. The book raises important interdisciplinary questions and offers timely insights into how the PR is developing and affecting democracy. Through evaluating, and often contesting anachronistic hypotheses, this book offers an insight for scholars and practitioners into PR in the 21st century, and how it can better serve democracy, rather than erode it. One weakness is that the conclusive recommendations, whilst pertinent, could be perceived as idyllic and may take much work to be incorporated into PR. Whilst the increase in PR training is practical, the symbiotic relationship between journalism and PR is unlikely to wane swiftly, as it has become ingrained in contemporary journalism. These recommendations could be illuminated further by more empirical investigations into PR's practical impact upon democracy in order to further contend the reconfiguration of PR.

Yet, this is an excellent text that will be essential reading for students, scholars and practitioners across disciplines. Concisely written, important topics are addressed and supported by an array of scholarly, and empirically-grounded case studies.

References:

Moloney, K., & McGrath, C. (2020). *Rethinking Public Relations Persuasion Democracy and Society*. Abingdon: Routledge.