
Government public relations have a bad reputation. While government has a right and a duty to communicate its programs and policies to the public, how it does so is the subject of on-going examination in academia, in the media, among the public, and in government itself. Government Public Relations: A Reader contributes to this discussion with a series of accessible, updated readings.

Government public relations mean different things to different people. Media view PR as spin—a dark force they must guard against. The public equate it with self-serving publicity stunts, crass image-making and even outright deception. Public administrators loathe the term and try to distance their communication work from PR, which has become a pejorative.

To put it another way, government public relations are suffering from bad PR. Government Public Relations aims to change that. The editor, Mordecai Lee, argues that public relations are a legitimate way for government to communicate with the public, and that PR techniques should be included in the contemporary public administrator’s toolbox, in much the same way as budgeting, human resources, strategic planning, and performance assessment are now. Lee worked in PR in both the government and the non-profit sectors and now teaches governmental affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He brings broad experience to this book and is its driving force. His voice we hear most clearly, in the introductions he wrote to all 25 chapters, and in the nine chapters he contributed. While the book claims to offer writings from international sources, only four are from outside the United States. I do not believe that this handicaps the book. After all, public relations are an American invention and it is appropriate that we hear from Americans. Nevertheless, as public relations expands internationally and increasingly becomes a central part of modern statecraft, scholars in communication, public relations, political science and public policy and administration might have been better served by a work with more international representation.

The previous reader on government public relations was published in 1981. The majority of the material for Lee’s book was written after 2000, an important consideration for anyone wishing to update their library. Lee’s stated intention is that the book be used in public administration courses in universities or as a secondary text in departments of journalism, communications, and public relations. He offers a useful teaching tool at the end of each chapter, where he poses questions for review and discussion, and lists additional readings. Although Lee says this is neither a history book nor a how-to book for practitioners, he does write that he hopes it encourages practitioners to rethink their attitudes to PR and recognize that public relations techniques can and should be used as a management device in government.

The book is organized into nine readable sections, from an overview of government public relations, to its purposes; and from PR in non-profit agencies, to future trends. Contributors discuss the practical uses of public relations in media relations, reporting governmental activities to the public, responding to the public, and in outreach activities, specifically, increasing the public’s use of services and programs, public education and public service campaigns, voluntary public compliance with laws and regulations, and of course, in crisis communications. The book argues that properly used, public relations can
improve government’s relationship with the citizenry and perhaps, as a result, contribute to a healthier democracy.

A good portion of the book is dedicated to media relations. Media remain critical to the success of any government public relations effort, particularly during times of crisis. However, journalists are generally portrayed as not interested in serious news coverage, preferring to report on the failures and foibles of politicians over any meaningful policy initiative. In one chapter, Lee writes that the increase in or proliferation of more profit-oriented media outlets has resulted in hyper-competition for audiences, less original reporting, more punditry, more spin, and an obsession with scandal and outrage. It is not clear however, how more effective government public relations would address this failure. In fact, Lee recommends government public relations bypass reporters by using the Internet and e-reporting directly to citizens on websites, through email and via other digital technology.

In another chapter, he writes that journalists’ superficial and negative coverage of government has increased the pressure on public relations practitioners to hone their skills for dealing with this increasingly unfair, distracted, and trivia-obsessed media. He recommends contemporary PR practitioners learn to speak in pithy sound-bites, look for allies in media who are concerned about a problem and might want to publicize it, and select spokespeople who media might find sympathetic. These are not new techniques for managing media.

So much of the book focuses on the role of media, yet there is no contribution from a journalist. A valuable addition to the book would be a chapter on the pressures media face: the 24-hour news cycle, dwindling newsroom resources, and increased governmental control of the news. It would be worth hearing what reporters think about government public relations, governmental efforts to define what’s news, and governmental message control. This would certainly inform public administrators, an audience Lee says he wants for the book.

The aim of the book is to normalize the use of public relations in government and to rehabilitate its reputation as a legitimate management tool in government. The thesis is that credible public relations techniques will improve the public’s relationship with government, resulting in a healthier democracy. However, media are an important pillar of democracy and an old-fashioned and adversarial approach to media relations only marginalizes reporters, who need to be part of the conversation about how we can build community and increase citizen participation.

Government public relations are increasingly strategic, meaning they must meet the stated goals of the organization, in this case the goals of the government. While the book discusses strategic public relations, which it says refers to the idea that public relations should be planned and managed by objectives that are evaluated and connected to organizational objectives, it does not examine the ethical implications of what that can mean. In Canada, there is growing interest in what strategic government communication does to the neutrality and the public service ethic of its practitioners. There is interest in what happens when the goals of government become the goals of the party in power, and whether that politicizes the communication work of public servants.

Lee is of course right that public relations ought not to be viewed as a malevolent force. Much government PR involves informing the public and being informed by the public—a legitimate and important two-way conversation. However, Lee defines public relations as managing different kinds of communication relationships with different kinds of publics. This means we must also acknowledge that managing one’s public relations has the potential to do more than simply inform and react. It can be pro-active; in other words,
it can work to create a public opinion environment that is friendly to the government’s policies or actions whether that is deserved or not. This is the fine line government PR walks. *Government Public Relations* may not answer all the questions, but it makes a worthy contribution to the discussion.

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