
When I entered the field of public relations, I was shocked by its insularity. In reading this book, I realize how much of the intellectual and social bandwidth that does exist within the mainstream has been provided through strategic interventions by Bob Heath. His 2001 Handbook of Public Relations enabled more global and plural voices, his 2005 Encyclopedia of Public Relations similarly broadened core concepts (e.g., postcolonialism), and the second edition of Rhetorical and Critical Studies in Public Relations (Toth, Heath, & Waymer, 2009), looks likely to emulate its influential predecessor (Toth & Heath, 1992) in opening significant space for alternative perspectives.

These comments set a context for the book under review here, which is Heath’s third book in the area of strategic issues management, and the subtitle indicates the breadth of coverage. His first book on strategic issues management, co-written with Richard Nelson, appeared in 1986, and his second, which was the first edition of this book, was sole-authored by Heath just over 10 years later, in 1997. This new edition is co-authored by Michael Palenchar, whose participation illustrates yet again Heath’s ability to generate collaborative work that opens opportunities for a range of emerging and younger scholars and also aligns with Heath’s willingness to step outside the normal parameters of public relation. In effect, he expands the field by transposing elements of it and fusing them with external viewpoints—as shown in other co-edited works: the Handbook of Crisis and Risk Communication (Heath & O’Hair, 2008) and Terrorism: Communication and Rhetorical Perspectives (O’Hair, Heath, Ledlow, & Ayotte, 2008).

While this second edition of Strategic Issues Management draws substantially from the first, it also introduces significant new material, updates the thinking, and reflects back on the changing history of the field. More than a decade on from the first edition, this book retrospectively surveys not only the pre-1980s situation with the antics of the oil giants, but also the complex changes and increasing fragmentation evident from the late 1990s to the present. Although well-known for his work as both a public relations practitioner and academic, Heath deserves more credit for broadening the field, for making it core to questions of issues and risk, and for taking insights from it into other disciplines. This particular book performs an excellent service in justifying the strategic utility of communication to issues managers, who may not be knowledgeable about public relations. Simultaneously, it imports desirable breadth from areas of strategy and branding to forge mutually beneficial exchanges.

The book itself is designed for good pedagogy. Each chapter opens with a relevant vignette about a real-life case that establishes why strategic issues management theory matters and ends with a set of questions to guide further student work and to raise issues about ethical practice. Chapter 1, for example, features an account of British Petroleum framed as “Enlightened Leader or Lightning Rod” (pp. 1-3) and ends by asking such questions as “What are the stages of strategic business planning? Are these the same for non-profits and government agencies?” Chapter 2 looks at historical foundations as a search for order. Its vignette starts in a late-nineteenth-century struggle between Westinghouse and Edison, but this is an historical examination with contemporary consequences. These clearly emerge with the chapter’s concluding questions: “Was John Hill standing on solid
principles when he took the tobacco industry as a client in 1953? Which of those principles would best inform your practice today and why?” (p. 86).

Although the book tends to cover some of the usual suspects in its case studies—Johnson & Johnson, Bhopal, McDonald’s, and the nuclear industry all feature prominently—the last two are updated to include still-relevant and disputed issues, rather than settled questions and accepted wisdom. In addition, Heath and Palenchar could defend this practice as providing commonly available source material because they also feature more recent cases such as Nike, Walmart, and the Mattel fracas around dangerous toys from China—a case whose title, “It Takes Two to Tango” (p. 273), avoids too-easy demonization of China—and their coverage of Nike can be commended for engaging with critical material (e.g., Knight & Greenberg, 2002).

Although radical critics will remain dissatisfied with how far they go, their seamless introduction of critique into a public relations textbook is accompanied by the seamless mainstreaming of Ulrich Beck’s theorizations of Risk Society. The former demonstrates a reduction in defensiveness to corporate critics; the latter shows a desirable diminution in intellectual insularity. The former is further expanded in the book’s contribution to recent re-evaluations of the position of activists in public relations theory and practice. Noting that “grassroots engagement in issues discussion and public policy formation is a global tradition” and that the U.S. “form of government . . . fashions policy through debate and activist politics” (p. 161), Heath and Palenchar situate activism as concerned with the strategic use of tools of change from people organizing, economic pressuring, public acting and speaking, through to legal weapons and even prayer, while, at the same time, endorsing Coombs and Holladay’s (2007) contention that activism “can be seen ‘as’ modern public relations” (p. 52), although it was “not until the mid-1990s that public relations researchers considered activists to be practicing public relations rather than simply posing an obstacle” (p. 52).

While acknowledging these advances, I, personally, would have liked to see Strategic Issues Management go further in its welcome commitment to public relations playing a part in the development of a “fully functioning society” (pp. 192-193) by taking an even less corporate-centred approach (e.g., in the discussion of Bhopal and Union Carbide). Academically, I would have liked to see more attention given to the substantial shift of public relations into social media, and consideration of the strategic issues associated with that move. That said, Heath and Palenchar undoubtedly provide a solid and stimulating update, which at over 400 pages is also value for money, of a groundbreaking text. Moreover, they do so in ways that strengthen the platform for constructing a more open and engaged public relations, and which also set out an excellent framework for teaching.

References


