

# Introduction and Overview

Let us consider a day in the life of a person named Pat. In the morning, Pat reads the nutritional information on her cereal box because she is concerned about eating too much salt. When Pat gets into her car, she buckles her seatbelt. For lunch, Pat chooses a place to eat that does not have trans fats in their food because she read a story online that said how bad trans fats were for your heart. For dinner, Pat and her friends go to a new restaurant she read about in the paper last week. After dinner, Pat stops by a jewelry store to look for a gift. Pat selects a jewelry store that supports “No Dirty Gold,” an effort to reduce pollution and other harmful effects from gold mining.

As an average person, Pat may be unaware of how much public relations may have shaped her actions that day. The nutritional label on the cereal box was a result of years of issues management by corporations and activist groups. For decades, public relations has been part of the social marketing efforts to promote seat belt usage. The concern about trans fats and health are a result of various activists creating awareness of the problem and pressuring companies to change their use of trans fats in foods. The news story about the restaurant was a result of media relations efforts by the restaurant’s public relations staff. Pat learned about “No Dirty Gold” when directed to their website that decried the dangers of gold mining by an advertisement or link on another website.

Public relations does seek to persuade people. It can influence what you buy, how you use a product, and what you do to improve your health. Yet the average person may have no real idea of how omnipresent public relations is in their lives. In fact, most people do not know what public relations really is. Critics warn us that the hidden public relations industry is a danger and that stealth is a strategic choice. Public relations is unseen largely because people choose not to

see it. News outlets do not announce a story was the result of a news release or pitch letter. However, if you look closely at the news you can determine which stories are likely to have public relations origins. Do some research and you will quickly learn about nutrition labels and the efforts to shape their content, the groups pushing for bans on trans fats and companies changing their products, and what efforts are underway to promote “No Dirty Gold” and who is doing the promoting.

Public relations is just below the surface in our daily lives. We can realize its existence and potential influence on our lives if we critically examine the messages generated by public relations. We want readers to think about their consumption of public relations as they learn how to construct those messages. Later in this chapter we discuss the notion of *public relations literacy*, the application of critical thinking skills to the examination of public relations techniques and the effects of those techniques on individuals and society. Public relations should be able to survive thoughtful interrogation. Those who would abuse and misuse public relations should fear public relations literacy. The tricks of these charlatans could and should be exposed. We think it is good for people to critically examine public relations messages and to understand how public relations might be shaping their lives and society. This opening example highlights a relationship between persuasion and public relations.

Periodically in the public relations literature there are defenses of the use of persuasion. For those of us from a communication studies background, such defenses appear to be an unusual and needless exercise. Of course a communication-based activity such as public relations would involve persuasion. Most, if not all, communication has a persuasive dimension. However, some in the field of public relations try to divorce the field from persuasion and claim public relations is objective and neutral. They contend public relations, like the news media, just presents the facts to people. They see public relations as a mechanism for carrying information from organizations to publics.

The objectivity of the news media has always been a myth. Journalists select what to report and how to report it. These selections involve subjectivity. The same holds true for public relations. Trying to argue there is no persuasion in public relations denies the fact that public relations does promote self-interests. That is not inherently a bad thing. Moreover, public relations as a field looks naive and even deceptive to people outside the field when it claims to be objective and simply a conduit for the facts. In this book we embrace rather than deny the self-interest that motivates public relations and believe persuasion lies at the core of public relations. Public relations is about influencing behaviors, knowledge, and attitudes. The practice must accept the implications that accompany the use of influence including issues of power and its abuse. This chapter begins by explaining our definition and conceptualization of public relations, considers how public relations’ own history has mis-served it, and ends with an outline of the book.

## The Quest to Define Public Relations

In *It's Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society*, we defined public relations as “the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of stakeholder and organizational relationships” (Coombs & Holladay, 2007b, p. 26). We choose the term *stakeholder* because it captures the idea that entities have some connection to one another for some reason. They are interdependent. These connections are why actors are enmeshed in a web of relationships. In addition, stakeholder theory does denote some consideration of power. Stakeholders are people, groups, organizations, or systems that can affect or can be affected by an organization. Managers look beyond shareholders and financial stakes to a broader range of stakes or connections to an organization. Stakeholder theory, rooted in the work of R. Edward Freeman (1984), seeks to identify and to understand the various stakeholders in an organization. By better understanding stakeholders, managers can decide who deserves their attention and time. Managers then work with the more important stakeholders with a hope of advancing organizational interests (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Stakeholders can shape organizational practices through their giving or retracting of stakes (support). If it is important for stakeholders to grant an organization a license to operate, they do have some power. However, critical scholars have expressed some concerns over using the term stakeholder.

The concern is that the term stakeholder has been co-opted by corporations and reflects the continuing corporate-centric bias in public relations. A corporate-centric view of public relations emphasizes how corporations use public relations to achieve economic success. True, Freeman's (1984) work does place the organization at the center of his explanation of stakeholders. Originally, stakeholders were conceptualized as groups whose support was essential to the survival of the organization. Later, stakeholders were seen as those who were affected by or could affect the organization. Ultimately, the term stakeholder today can legitimately be viewed as a way that organizations, especially corporations, evaluate groups jockeying for their attention. There is compelling evidence to support the critical claim that “stakeholder” is tainted by its corporate use and an emphasis on the centrality of the organization.

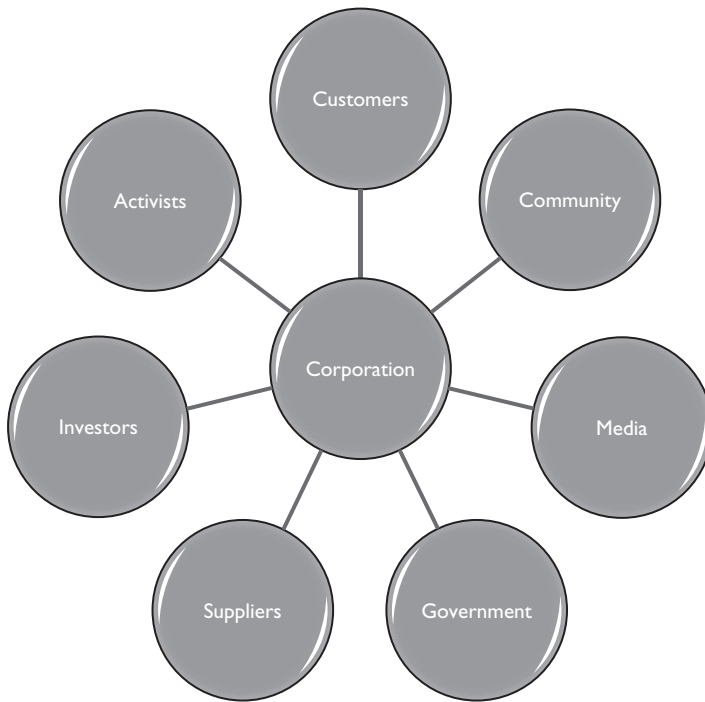
Alternatively, some have argued for the use of the term *public*. However, the corporate-centric taint also plagues “public.” A public forms “when stakeholders recognize one or more of the consequences as a problem and organize to do something about it or them” (Grunig & Repper, 1992, p. 124). The consequences center on the connection between the organization and stakeholders. Hence, publics form in reaction to organizational actions. Publics develop when they realize they share a concern over an organization's action and join forces to address that “issue.” Publics are aware they are connected to one another and choose to take action. Stakeholders may realize others share their stake but are not an active entity. “Publics ... organize around issues and seek out organizations that create those issues” (Grunig & Repper, 1992, p. 128).

Grunig's (1989a, 1989c) situational theory of publics tells public relations practitioners to engage those publics most likely to communicate on an issue. The situational theory of publics uses surveys to determine which people are aware of a problem and interested in doing something about it. The surveys assess public interest by determining the extent to which people perceive a problem (problem recognition), the amount of concern they have for the problem (level of involvement), and extent to which they perceive factors limiting their ability to address the problem (constraint recognition) (Grunig, 1989a). Situational theory makes value judgments and is used to prioritize publics – who will receive an organization's attentions. Clearly, the organization is still at the center of how public relations theorists have conceptualized "public." The terms stakeholder and public both use organizations as a reference point in their conceptualizations. Hence, we see no reason to favor the use of the term public over stakeholder in an effort to be more neutral in our definition.

Perhaps the term *constituencies* is a better choice than stakeholders and organizations. Constituencies can be defined as groups of people in a similar situation. By this definition stakeholders are constituencies and organizations are constituencies. Stakeholders share a stake while people in organizations share an affiliation with that organization. We are not saying that organizations have not used the term constituencies and that the term is perfectly neutral. However, the conceptualization of constituencies was not developed using organizations as a reference point. We could revise our definition: *public relations is the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of constituency relationships*.

Definitions are a point of view. They tell people what is important and, by implication, what is unimportant. The ideas that are important for us are mutual influence, web of relationships, and management. Let's start with mutual influence. Contrary to some views, we feel public relations is far from a neutral activity. As Moloney (2005) rightly notes, people engage in public relations largely from self-interest and self-advantage. Even those entities engaged in social marketing – the application of traditional marketing principles to solving societal problems and benefiting the recipients of the message (Weinreich, n.d.) – have an interest that drives their public relations effort. We feel public relations is about advocacy and power. Too often, those who write about public relations use the guise of informational efforts to hide intent but should acknowledge they are engaged in persuasion. Moreover, we do not pretend that the influence is equal among constituents. Influence is a type of power when one constituency can alter the behavior of another. Rarely do two parties in a relationship have equal influence/power. In most instances, corporations and government agencies are the constituencies with the most power in the web of relationships. Still, any constituency has some power when it can remove itself from the web of relationships. Moloney (2005) considers public relations a "struggle for communicative advantage" (p. 553) and we concur. Constituencies use public relations to compete with one another in efforts to influence the other players in the web of relationships.

Frequently, public relations textbooks treat each relationship between two constituencies in isolation from the others. Generally, the textbooks are



**Figure 1.1** Corporate-centric view of public relations

corporate-centric, as illustrated in figure 1.1. So students learn about media relations or community relations as distinct units and processes. This creates the impression that the relationships are independent rather than interdependent. When constituencies take action (communicate with others), it has the potential to affect more than one relationship. Therefore, it is important to remember the web of relationships.

Another important feature of the web of relationships is the connection to social capital. *Social capital* is “The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248). Constituencies want to manage the web of relationships because of the social capital generated by that web. Social capital makes it easier for constituencies to achieve their goals. This can include advocacy efforts to improve the health of a community, reduce greenhouse gases, or reduce impediments to corporate profitability.

Modern public relations has attempted to re-energize the term *relationship*. This reclamation includes an emphasis on building strong relationships with constituencies and ways to measure the strength of those relationships. The relationship-oriented public relations research reflects the corporate-centric view. Organizations are said to derive benefits from close relationships with constituencies. The rationale for the relationships clearly is grounded in the benefits the constituents provide the organization. Customers are a prime illustration.

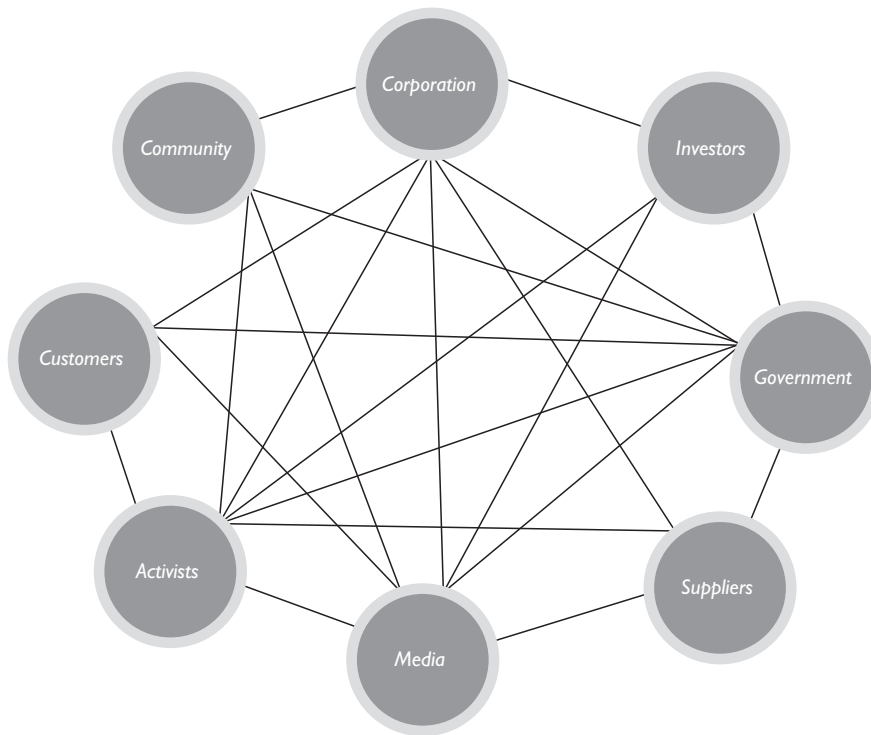
Corporations want customers that have close ties to the corporation and perhaps even become advocates or evangelists for the brand.

Consider an alternative view based on Simon's Empty World Hypothesis. The Empty World Hypothesis holds that most things are weakly connected to one another, what Weick (1979) terms *loose coupling*. People or entities often benefit more from their weak ties than from their strong ties. The typical example is that weak ties are the most common route to finding employment. Weak ties extend a person or entity's reach and supply them with unique information they are unlikely to find in their close relationships. Research across a variety of fields supports the value of weak connections/loose coupling/weak relationships.

More recently, activists have begun to recognize the value of weak connections/relationships. Instead of creating large organizations that have a strong central structure, some experts argue that activists should be netcentric. *Netcentric activists* are collections of weakly linked activist groups that form a loosely connected coalition (Kearns, n.d.). When action is needed, the activist groups are mobilized through tighter/stronger links, but then return to their loosely connected structure once the action is completed. Weak links create communication channels that are used to reach and to mobilize the various activist groups and form a tightly connected coalition for short periods of time. Moreover, the weak ties help to build social capital that can be spent on activist efforts.

As figure 1.2 illustrates, constituencies can be heavily interconnected. Are all these links regularly active? Probably not. Figure 1.2 shows the potential reach of a relationship web, not the strength of the relationships. The web of relationships is rather fluid. The links that are active and relationships that are close will vary over time and situations. In addition, no one constituency is monolithic. Each constituency can be subdivided into smaller units. For instance, figure 1.2 illustrates the links that might be active when a community group seeks to block the building of a facility it deems harmful to the community and potential subgroups that may emerge within the constituencies. Coalitions shift in the relational web as different constituencies and subgroups form temporary strong ties and may even conflict with other constituencies in the web.

Perhaps corporations should take a lesson from the activists. It could be unrealistic to expect most or even a larger percentage of a corporation's constituencies to have close relationships with an organization. Weak links/relationships may be sufficient. Weick's (1979) idea of partial inclusion is helpful here. *Partial inclusion* holds that people have connections and affiliations with a wide range of groups, not just one. As a result, people have divided loyalties. People are invested in a variety of constituencies, not just one – they are partially included in the various constituencies. It forces people to choose between the conflicting groups. So which constituency is favored when issues are contested? A person typically selects the group in which she or he has invested the most or rejects those in which they have minimal investments. The investment is a type of social capital. However, investment is not a perfect predictor of which constituency



**Figure 1.2** Interconnectedness of constituents

a person will select when there are conflicts. If the investments in conflicting constituencies are small, the outcome is difficult to predict.

The weak ties provide avenues for staying connected and building social capital, but do not have to be overused. The role of public relations may be to build and maintain links, not to obsess over the relationship quality. Those links need to be two-way. All constituents need to be open and responsive to communication from others in the relationship web. Responsiveness could be the hallmark of an effective link. I do not need to talk with you all the time, but I do need to know that when I contact you, you will respond. Ties need to be strengthened when a constituency is seeking support. Again, the issue of partial inclusion is a factor. Different entities may vie for the support of the same constituencies. When entities vie for support, they are targeting the undecided or uncommitted constituencies. The entities should have already rallied their supporters (those with close connections) to their sides. Links are used to send messages designed to build support. When there is true competition for support, constituents are more likely to choose the entity that can craft the most appealing message. The point here is that corporations and other entities should not think all ties must be strong ties with all constituencies all the time. A more likely scenario is that most constituencies have weak ties to

entities. It is the maintenance and utilization of those weak ties that will make the greatest difference when self-interests collide in the web of relationships.

In our definition of public relations, “management of relationships” may seem to have a negative connotation because management is often equated with efforts to control or manipulate. We are using management not as control but as attempts to shape relationships. Those attempts to shape relationships can easily fail. Public relations utilizes various communication tools in its efforts to influence constituencies and to shape the web of relationships. Public relations is one mechanism for attracting and retaining constituencies in the web of relationships and those efforts are an exercise in influence.

Consider the following example. A corporation tries to convince an environmental activist group to partner with them in an effort to reduce its carbon footprint. The partnership results in changes to corporate policies and reductions in emissions. A campaign is undertaken to make various constituencies aware of the partnership and changes in the organization’s practices. Communities benefit from cleaner air, employees have a source of pride, customers have another reason to buy the corporation’s products, investors have another reason to purchase the corporation’s stock, the activist groups have switched from protesting against to counseling and testifying for the corporation, and the news media can present stories about the “green” corporation. The web of relationships is enhanced and the organization benefits from a friendlier operating environment. But activists can reject the partnership bid or other constituencies may view the campaign as “greenwashing.” Greenwashing refers to corporations enacting only superficial changes in behaviors, but relying on public communication to convey the impression they are concerned about environmental issues and taking actions to limit negative impacts on the environment. When activist groups counsel corporations, the groups run the risk of being viewed as “selling out” to corporate interests. The partnership effort may fail because it creates a reason to not be a part of the web of relationships with either the corporation or the activist group.

## **An “Alternate Reality” for Public Relations**

The term *public relations* does not always bring out the most favorable reaction when it is used. Too often, the media and people in general use the term as a derogatory comment, such as “It’s a public relations move.” The insult involves the belief that public relations is all about style and not substance. Clearly, people who have been through a public relations course know – or should know – differently. Public relations must be rooted in actions to be effective. Yes, a great deal of public relations is symbolic; but any field that trades in communication is largely symbolic. Symbols are great. They make society possible. It is the misuse of symbols and communication that is problematic.

Public relations often is equated with spin and publicity. Spin doctors make sure only the positive information about an organization or individual is communicated



to others and reported in the news media, or they reinterpret information to cast it in a more favorable light. Public relations practitioners are roadblocks to people being truly informed. The public assumes public relations is a mechanism corporations use to polish their images by hiding their true selves. Again, an introductory public relations course should correct that perception. The problem is that the vast majority of people who encounter the term public relations never had and will never have had a public relations course. Instead, the term public relations is victimized by its own past that leads many to treat it as a pariah in society. As we have argued in *It's Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society*, we see public relations as a necessary component of society (Coombs & Holladay, 2007b).

In science fiction, writers often talk of alternate timelines or realities. These realities are similar but have variations due to different choices that have been made in the parallel worlds. Perhaps there is an alternate reality where public relations is embraced and widely recognized for its contributions to society. We posit that such a reality would not be that different from the one we currently experience. All that needs to be changed is one critical choice the field of public relations seems to have made. Obviously, people in a field really made the choices that place public relations where it is today, or could be, in our alternate reality.

The critical choice is to designate the beginning of the twentieth century as the birth of public relations. Many writers, especially public relations historians, claim that public relations was born from corporate reactions to the muckrakers and reformers of that time. This choice gives rise to two of the common criticisms of public relations. Journalists left newspapers to become public relations practitioners for corporations. First problem, public relations is a tool of corporations. Second problem, public relations is just a simplistic form of media relations (attempts to place information into the news media) or spin.

Corporations are not inherently evil; some just choose to act that way. However, for many social critics, being a “corporate tool” is a scathing indictment. From their perspective, public relations has been used to oppress workers, exploit consumers, harm society, and ravage the environment. During the course of this book we will examine examples of how public relations has been part of these and other acts against humanity. We also will consider how public relations has been used to improve the human condition. Furthermore, if journalists created public relations, then at its heart it is just media relations. Moreover, the practice was born to protect corporations by promoting the corporation’s view of reality through the presentation of selective facts under the guise of objectivity borrowed from journalism. To say it another way, the need for spin ushered public relations into this world. People do not have to be social critics to adopt this view of public relations. The news media frequently tell people that public relations is spin.

In our alternate reality, public relations historians trace its roots to reformers of the 1800s. Public relations becomes an important device in civil society. Civil society is composed neither of business nor government, but is essential to the operation of a democracy. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private voluntary organizations (PVOs) are part of civil society. Civil society allows people

to come together and to debate issues of the day and petition the government for change. Those seeking to end slavery, support women's rights, and fight the evils of alcohol are the founders of public relations in our alternate reality. Public relations was a tool for social reform. It was born from activists desiring to improve the human condition and was a tool of public advocacy. Public relations was persuasion designed to convince people of the need to make changes to society. What if the term public relations had been used to describe what those First Reform Era activists were doing? These activists would be the founders of public relations. Public relations would be rooted neither in the corporate realm nor journalism/media relations. It would be a valued tool in social reform. When corporations and their journalist cronies began using public relations in the 1900s, it would be treated as the spread of public relations to the corporate sector, not its birth. The roots of public relations would be firmly planted within reform and civil society rather than corporations and the news media.

Our alternate reality is not that far fetched. The key difference is that the term public relations was not used until around 1900. What the First Reform Era activists did was indeed public relations. They sought to use various communication tactics to influence public opinion. How different is that from the claims of what corporations were doing later? Moreover, the corporate response itself was to the public relations efforts of the muckrakers and other activists. There was a battle to shape public opinion that had at least two sides.

Because we have no way to visit this alternative reality, public relations is where it is today, saddled with the corporate and media baggage it packed long ago. Nor will any revisionist history of public relations radically alter how most people view the field. What can be done is to recognize all that public relations is. This means examining the good and the bad, the activist as well as the corporate use of public relations, and embracing rather than denying the advocacy and self-interests associated with public relations.

Howard Zinn (2005) wrote a controversial but influential history text titled *A People's History of the United States*. Zinn sought to give voice to those history had forgotten, the oppressed and the marginalized. So his text includes the genocide of Native Americans, the details of slavery, and the oppression of American workers. Critics of the book saw it as overly critical and overly pessimistic about the US, and as having a pronounced political edge. There is some truth to all these charges. However, there is a bigger picture to be appreciated through Zinn's work. That bigger picture is the value of hearing multiple voices, the very cornerstone of democracy. One of the objectives of this book is to continue our work from *It's Not Just PR* and give voice to the activist contributions to public relations and to view the field, warts and all. We believe this is to some degree an alternate vision of public relations. Historically and contemporaneously, what have the marginalized voices given and continue to give to public relations? How has public relations helped to shape people's lives for the better and for the worse? Why does society need public relations?

The concept of public relations literacy, the ability to identify, analyze, and evaluate public relations messages, can help us to wrestle with these larger

issues. Public relations literacy is inspired by and derived from media literacy. In general, media literacy helps people develop a critical understanding of the media, the techniques used by the media, and the effects of those techniques (Media Literacy, 1997).

The Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute defines media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms” (Aspen Institute, 1992). It is useful to move beyond the definition to specific elements of media literacy. To be media literate, a person should understand how the mass media industries operate, be aware of how mass media can affect society and individuals, apply critical thinking skills to the evaluation of media content, and have frameworks for analyzing media messages (Silverblatt, 2001).

Public relations is primarily a mediated enterprise and does have effects on individuals and society. Therefore, media literacy is relevant. In fact, some public relations issues do appear in discussions of media literacy (Baran, 2008). We feel public relations literacy is more specific and warrants consideration in its own right although it is informed by media literacy. In addition, public relations literacy is not a criticism nor a condemnation of public relations. The point is to create critical consumers of public relations actions who understand the effects of those actions. The point is not to create people who will simply bash public relations as a profession. We need critical consumers because public relations trades in influence and people must be critical when evaluating influence attempts.

Public relations literacy is the application of critical thinking skills to the examination of public relations techniques and the effects of those techniques on individuals and society. Public relations literacy skills include the ability and willingness to understand public relations messages, an understanding and respect for the power of public relations messages, and the ability to critically evaluate a public relations message regardless of its source. Public relations literacy demands an understanding and interrogation of the public relations process. Just as the media have various genres or forms, public relations has various disciplines. To be critical, a person needs a working understanding of the various disciplines of public relations. Chapters 5 through 14 present common disciplines in public relations. The theories and principles discussed in those chapters provide insight into the disciplines. Furthermore, the reflections in each of the chapters suggest key points to consider when interpreting and evaluating public relations actions for each discipline.

The critical evaluation of public relations would be built around a series of questions:

- Who is creating the public relations action/message?
- Why did they create the public relations action/message?
- Who will gain or lose from the public relations action/message?
- Who is the intended audience for the public relations action/message?
- Whose voices are heard and absent from the public relations action/message?

Answering these questions helps to reveal the self-interests and influence goals in the public relations actions. Self-interests are critical when evaluating ideas and

choices. We start by understanding who is actually sending the message and what they have to gain – their motivation for engaging in public relations. As some people win, others may lose as a result of the public relations action. We must look deeper into the public relations action to determine if there are specific losers if we are to consider the full ramifications of a public relations action.

Understanding the target for the public relations action is insightful because it reminds us who is considered relevant and irrelevant. Will the target for the public relations action benefit, lose, or simply facilitate the process? Why were other constituents not targeted? We can learn whose interests are being advanced and whose are being ignored. Finally, public relations should be about the free exchange of ideas that permits people to select the ideas that best fit with their views, what is often called the marketplace of ideas. Chapter 3 provides additional details on the marketplace of ideas. The marketplace of ideas is reflected by the voices appearing in public relations actions. Who is being heard, who is silent, and who might be being drowned out by the voices of others? It is instructive to learn who is being excluded and who seems to have no voice in public relations matters. Is the marketplace of ideas inclusive or restrictive? Ideally, the goal is to increase the number of voices in the marketplace, but this is not always the case.

The five questions for public relations literacy push people to look below the surface of public relations actions to unpack their effects on individuals and society. We try to address many of these questions in the reflection sections of chapters 5 through 14. Chapter 15 returns to public relations literacy and reviews key ideas from these ten chapters that could be used to build public relations literacy. We also recognize additional questions can be useful as well. Public relations literacy is in its infancy and will evolve as more people consider what other ideas will improve this nascent concept.

## **The Future of Public Relations**

If public relations' past is constraining and problematic, what of its future? It is difficult to predict the exact future of public relations. However, we can identify trends and issues that will be salient in the field's future. Two central trends are technology and globalization. Two relevant issues are ethics and transparency.

As with most fields, the future of public relations is bound to technology and globalization. Today, technology refers to online communication. Constituencies have many more and improved options for communicating with one another than they did ten or even three years ago. Consider the availability of interactive video, instant messaging, blogs, vlogs (video weblogs), and other communication tools. You can use all of these from a mobile phone such as the I-phone. Chapter 7 will consider the role of online media in public relations in detail.

The academic and practitioner literatures have rushed to embrace and to promote the use of online communication. However, the embrace has been too

enthusiastic at times. We are not neo-Luddites advocating a rejection of technology. But we do recognize the original Luddites and neo-Luddites do have a point in their contention that technology can dehumanize people and its effects may not be completely positive. Think of the “cyborgs” you see walking around linked to work through the blue tooth technology in their ears or the PDAs in their hands. We caution against a rush to online communication at the expense of other communication channels and the use of overly aggressive online tactics that seem to violate the spirit of the Internet. We must always remember a mix of channels is usually best. Each situation should be examined carefully to determine which channels will prove most effective for a public relations effort. A blog is not the cure-all to every public relations concern. Public relations people must learn how best to integrate the online environment into their efforts. Almost every chapter in this book will include a discussion of online communication and its impact on public relations.

The public relations move to the online world is viewed as rather aggressive by some critics. Public relations is corrupting the independent exchange of information spirit of the Internet. Public relations practitioners now pitch or even buy bloggers to write favorable comments about an organization. Under the banner of public relations, actions have been taken to suppress fair comment and free speech to comment on corporations. The word *flog* (fake blog) was created to cover public relations practitioners posing as “independent” bloggers. Granted, these are isolated examples for the most part and do not reflect all public relations activities on the web. Still, these abuses by those claiming to practice public relations serve to pollute the online environment and cast additional criticisms on the field.

There are favorable trends developing from the online application of public relations as well. Activist groups can use various online technologies that are comparatively inexpensive ways to reach potential constituents and build their power. Online resources are used to recruit and mobilize supporters, pressure decision makers, generate media coverage, and raise money for other public relations efforts (Coombs & Holladay, 2007a). But some activist groups have abused that power by trying to silence the voices of others. Chapters 5 and 7 provide a further discussion of activists and online public relations. Public relations will continue its quest to understand the online environment and how best to integrate online public relations with traditional public relations.

More and quicker communication has made the world smaller. By smaller we mean easier to communicate and to connect with one another. Webs of relationships are global rather than local or national. Although chapter 14 concentrates on global public relations, each chapter discusses how public relations is now global because constituent networks are global. Public relations efforts still can involve just more than local members of a relationship web. Consider local citizens seeking to change the policy of how utility companies trim trees. There is no need for this issue to go global. But it does not take much to move a public relations effort from the local to the global level when such a move is desirable

for one or more of the constituencies involved. Consider how a band of rebels in the poorest area of Mexico, the Zapatistas, used laptops and the Internet to make the world aware of their struggles to preserve a way of life in a remote area of Mexico few had even heard of before their postings.

The Zapatistas, or the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), is composed mostly of indigenous peoples from the state of Chiapas in southeastern Mexico. They are fighting for control over their lands and resources as well as opposing globalization. The Zapatistas fear that the cattle ranchers and oil companies will continue to take their land, resources, and eventually their way of life. The Internet is one way that the Zapatistas have brought their plight to the notice of the rest of the world and continue to garner global support for their efforts (Holloway & Pelaez, 1998). Today, constituencies need to think of the global implications of their words and actions.

Ethics always will remain a concern because of public relations' role in influencing others. Consider how the professional associations have and continue to wrestle with ethics. Visit any popular public relations blog and you will read postings about ethics. Public relations is influence and influence is dangerous when abused. Concerns for ethics remind practitioners to honor their responsibilities to society. Discussions of ethics are as old as the written word. Ethics never should go out of style.

Transparency is becoming a partner with ethics. Transparency is about being open and honest with constituents and constituents seeking to make organizations transparent. Transparency relates directly to ethics. Transparency can reveal unethical practices and the threat of exposure can keep the unethically inclined in check. People are less likely to violate the trust of constituents if they fear that indiscretion will be exposed and punished. The vast majority of public relations practitioners are ethical and welcome transparency. Unfortunately, the field continues to be plagued by the small minority of unethical practitioners. The various chapters in this book discuss the unethical practices to reinforce the "right" way to engage in public relations. Ideally, greater transparency should reduce unethical behavior, but only time will tell if that ideal is realized.

## **Structure of the Book**

This book is divided into three sections: orientation, functions, and conclusion. The orientation section is composed of the first five chapters. These chapters orient the readers to how we are conceptualizing and operationalizing public relations. Chapter 1 has presented our definition and view of public relations. Chapter 2 considers ethical concerns with public relations and why that topic is so germane to the field. Chapter 3 discusses the concepts of transparency and the marketplace of ideas along with public relations' role in those debates. Chapter 4 emphasizes how public relations is strategic. Chapter 5 elaborates on the role of activists and activism in public relations.

The functions section examines the primary functions of public relations and how these functions interconnect various constituencies in the web of relationships. Chapter 6 examines media relations, a basic public relations function. Chapter 7 addresses the new online media and the way in which public relations has both adopted and at times abused online communication. Chapter 8 ties public relations to social marketing and use of communication to shape people's lives and health. Chapter 9 develops the process of reputation management, what many now view as a central function in corporate public relations. Chapter 10 explores the dynamics of issues management and how it is utilized by a variety of constituencies. Chapter 11 discusses risk management and how it serves as a common concern for constituencies. Chapter 12 is dedicated to crisis management and considers how the tension between financial and social concerns impacts how constituencies are treated in a crisis. As with chapter 9, it reflects the strong corporate focus of some public relations functions.

Chapters 13 and 14 move to a more global level with corporate social responsibility and public diplomacy. Chapter 13 explores the concept of corporate social responsibility, including its global nature and how it may serve to bind constituencies into a web of relationships. Chapter 14 focuses on international public relations, focusing on globalization, terrorism as a form of public relations, and public diplomacy and how it is used to shape international perceptions of various constituencies. The final section is chapter 15, the conclusion. Chapter 15 presents a review of key elements of the book with an emphasis on answering the question "Does society need public relations?" It also includes a return to the discussion of public relations literacy.

## Discussion Questions

- 1 In this chapter we presented this definition of public relations: "Public relations is the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of constituency relationships." Explain key concepts in this definition.
- 2 Describe the distinctions among the terms *stakeholder*, *public*, and *constituency*.
- 3 What are the benefits of "weak ties"?
- 4 How does a corporate-centric view of public relations limit our understanding of the practice of public relations?
- 5 What is public relations literacy? Why is this concept important in contemporary society?