

Melissa Aronczyk and Maria I. Espinoza, **A Strategic Nature: Public Relations and the Politics of American Environmentalism**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022, 320 pp., \$27.95 (paperback).

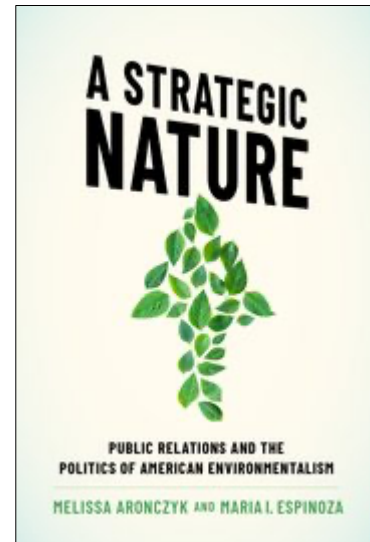
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Calls for more dramatic action on the triple environmental crises of climate change, biodiversity, and pollution have been met with well-financed and organized responses by the industries most responsible. Popular conceptions of these corporate misdeeds pin the responsibility entirely on the corporations themselves, treating the public relations (PR) professionals that created and communicated the corporate line as mouthpieces for those with real power. In this framework, it is the responsibility of the public, particularly journalists, to counter misleading narratives and create the conditions for taking environmental action.

***A Strategic Nature: Public Relations and the Politics of American Environmentalism***, written by Melissa Aronczyk, an associate professor at Rutgers University in the School of Communication & Information, and Maria Espinoza, a PhD student in the sociology department at Rutgers University, contests the idea that PR practitioners only convey the views of their corporate clients. The authors' analysis suggests that overlooking the PR networks behind corporate campaigns or expecting that journalism can simply debunk misleading information misses the point and "downplay[s] the authority and responsibility of PR agents" (p. 2).

In fact, the authors argue that PR professionals created many of the frameworks that define U.S. environmentalism, contributing to the "connotative indeterminacy of the notion of sustainability and its availability for 'capture' by different actors with varying motivations" (p. 139). The book positions communications professionals as crucial elements in shaping the "ways that struggles are won, resources allocated, and beliefs fostered about environmental problems" (p. 4). Its central contention is that the American environmental movement and professional PR are historically linked and that "neither . . . would look the way it does today without the other" (p. 3). The authors resist framing PR interventions in terms of truth and lies. Rather, they examine the role of PR in defining the debate, arguing that it plays an ideological role, rather than providing neutral tools and techniques. In this way, PR's contribution is to turn the environment into a communication problem by replacing questions of concrete action with questions of information, awareness, and self-interest.

The first half of the book takes a historical approach that draws primarily on archival research. It begins in the progressive era with a chapter on the contest between Theodore Roosevelt's Forest Service, which oriented environmentalism around the continuous harvesting of lumber, and the preservationist inclinations of the nascent environmental movement led by John Muir. The success of the forest services in these early clashes highlights the development of a professional communication strategy that harnessed



environmental language against its opponents. The second chapter offers a particularly damning account of how the PR industry learned to use its own metrics of health against those of the labor movement and communities affected by polluting industries, such as the coal-mining industry. This ability to manage external environmental criticism continued into the postwar period, until countercultural and environmental movements won a series of regulatory victories, putting polluting industries in a defensive posture. These successes were followed by a reorientation of PR strategies toward planned management of environmental issues, rather than confrontation. By the time the Environmental Protection Agency was founded, the industry had adapted to its new reality and replaced outright antagonism with advocacy for self-regulation, public-private partnerships, and consensus-building approaches in which ambitious environmental regulation could be blunted to compromise with industry goals.

This strategic management approach successfully ended the era of aggressive environmental legislation in the United States, and, by the time the European Union consolidated and the North American Free Trade Agreement was being negotiated, far-sighted PR practitioners, particularly pioneering figures such as E. Bruce Harrison, had exported their model of environmental communication through international networks of “green” PR firms. This network deployed a preference for environmental communication over environmental behavior during a critical period in the development of environmental governance regimes. Chapter 6 marks a turn to the present, using interviews to examine contemporary use of PR in climate advocacy by civil society groups. The authors argue that advocates’ embrace of PR as if it were a neutral tool infuses their efforts with its ideology, leading them to accept and accommodate existing structures and norms, rather than challenge them, and to downplay or discard issues and viewpoints that are incompatible with information-based solutions. The book’s empirical chapters close with an assessment of a contemporary case called “Data for Climate Action (D4CA)” (p. 174), in which tech interests vie to apply privatized data resources to environmental challenges. To the authors, this program demonstrates the triumph of the PR effort to define the environment as an information and communication problem, with solutions tailored to the interests and expertise of information managers, rather than natural systems.

The real strength of this book is its offer of a way to think about PR beyond being journalism’s evil twin or a source of spin in the context of environmental politics. It provides a fascinating history of how PR professionals have actively constructed and managed public understandings of the environment. It illuminates the mechanics of PR, which are often obscured or written off as the value-neutral communication of the positions of other actors. This reconsideration of the role of PR in framing environmental politics positions the PR industry among other epistemic communities, such as scientists, whose potential to shape policy has been more widely researched (Haas, 2015).

The book’s focus on how PR was able to successfully frame its efforts as legitimate democratic practice “through appeals to the public, to information, and to democracy” (p. 9) can be usefully compared to Munshi and Kurian’s (2021) *Public Relations and Sustainable Citizenship*, in which the research subject—global activist groups’ use of PR—contrasts deeply with the corporate networks analyzed by Aronczyk and Espinoza. In *A Strategic Nature*, PR is industrial in scope and effect—networks of corporate PR firms shape national and international negotiation in their own image to the point where even the opposition—the environmentalists and civil society groups that exist to advocate for environmental alternatives—turn to the PR industry’s preferred frameworks of information, the market, and enlightened self-interest in making their

own points. Munshi and Kurian (2021) present an alternate universe of PR activity, one defined by the strategic creation of linked publics around the concept of “sustainable citizenship.” These linked publics—school strikers and indigenous climate activists, for instance—are presented as a tool for challenging and resisting existing power relations between citizens and the state. They provide counter-narratives and contest the discourses of corporate and international elites. Using examples from climate change activism, these authors center their analysis on “communicative acts of resistance” (p. 65) linked to the concept of sustainable citizenship, rather than specific interests or organizations.

In many ways, the two books are complementary parts of the sociocultural turn in PR research that has been building over the last decade (Edwards & Hodges, 2011). Certainly, they share the claim that PR practices have primarily worked to legitimize the efforts of industry and state interests in market systems. On the vital point of whether the same practices can work against systems of oppression, there is a clear split. Aronczyk and Espinoza argue that the public relations industry has worked ideologically, turning all conflicts into questions of information and reformatting political questions around the environment away from inconvenient material realities. Munshi and Kurian (2021) envision a radical PR built around its own ideological center, that of sustainable citizenship. The two visions are starkly different, though a PR of sustainable citizenship suggests alternative paths forward that Aronczyk and Espinoza do not identify in the PR of environmental information politics.

However, the difference may also be one of scope, rather than vision. Aronczyk and Espinoza are assessing critical junctures in American environmentalism and while the book occasionally looks beyond U.S. borders, particularly in the chapter detailing how the model was exported to Europe, it is not focused on environmental activism or policy solutions, but rather on commercial environmental PR and its contribution to “the incremental ways by which the environment became, for many American publics, the wrong kind of problem: a problem of information politics and publicity instead of a problem of our continued existence” (p. 14). This book provides an essential understanding of what environmental PR has been and the effects of that history on framing public understandings of the environment. In doing so, it opens the door for alternative visions of environmental and democratic communication.

### References

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