[Author's Accepted Manuscript – May 2025]

Book Review: *Depth Public Relations: After the masquerade*, by Jo Fawkes. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. 208 pages, $83.99 (paperback), $191.10 (Hardback), $64.60 (eBook). ISBN: 9781032349954.

Review by Clea Bourne, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Acknowledging PR's disowned parts

The second Trump presidency brought more fodder to the debate over what constitutes 'PR' and who practises it. Just as with the first Trump presidency, experienced PR professionals now working for the US administration regularly display conduct proscribed by PR textbooks and professional bodies. For instance, the new director of communications at the US Office for Personnel Management somehow found time between defending DOGE[1] to work on her side hustle of fashion influencing. Meanwhile, the new White House press secretary launches almost-daily verbal hostilities against varied targets – migrants, foreign officials, even US billionaires.

While it remains unusual for PR practitioners to make the headlines, public relations does feature in many a news story. When it does, PR practitioners will debate any communications fall-out via public forums, where they inevitably conclude 'that's just not PR'.

For psychoanalysts, such professional pronouncements might be labelled a moment of 'misrecognition'. Jo Fawkes deconstructs such moments across two acts of her fascinating book *Depth Public Relations: After the masquerade,* in which she issues this clarion call: If ever there were a time for public relations to "acknowledge its disowned parts", to stop teaching 'best practice' PR and instead teach for what the world *really* is, says Fawkes — it is now (2023, p. 132).

Essentially, the question Fawkes poses is 'How does Public Relations come to know itself?' Her well-developed thesis is that PR never has the opportunity to *truly* know itself because PR – and the people who practise it – are always caught up in a constant performance, in which there is no time for self-reflection. Drawing on fields such as Jungian psychology, Goffman's dramaturgy and Bakhtinian carnivalisation, Fawkes examines professional identity and practice, and how "outworn patterns of response" in PR fail to meet the field's changing circumstances (2023, p. 145). In this sense, *Depth Public Relations* is broader in its theoretical exploration than some of Fawkes' previous work. Indeed, it is fascinating to see how Fawkes' inquiry into public relations has evolved, while remaining true to her longstanding concerns with professional identity and ethics (See e.g. Fawkes, 2015).

Fawkes peels back some of the established canon of public relations scholarship to argue that, over many years of theory building, the PR discipline has forged varying identities for itself. Depending on a chosen scholar's disciplinary stance, public relations is both highly promotional or distanced from promotional pursuits; inherently strategic, or else not strategic at all; an ethical pursuit for some, while distinctly unethical for others. Fawkes's core argument is that all these realities can be true at

[1] DOGE – the Department of Government Efficiency, a US federal agency.

the same time, pointing to a futility in attempting to bifurcate PR into what it 'is' or 'is not'. The fact that we continue to do so every day is a given. What Fawkes delves into is *why*. Her answer is that PR's collective ego remains seemingly unaware of its shadow personality, unconsciously projecting rejected aspects (the 'not PR') onto 'Others' — causing those supposedly unsavoury 'Others' to carry PR's unlived elements.

The book's title *Depth Public Relations,* together with Fawkes' core frame of shadow and inwardness, stems primarily from Karl Jung's 'depth psychology', which explores the influence of the unconscious mind on our conscious thoughts and behaviours. Applying this approach, *Depth Public Relations* asks us to engage with what lies behind PR's mask, and to "recognise the shared humanity of all participants in communication" (Fawkes, 2023, p. 4). The book's underlying premise is that psychological complexes can be found within groups as well as individuals. Fawkes suggests that were PR itself to undergo therapy, then a Jungian depth approach would treat all PR's facets "as aspects of the whole" by de-centering the collective professional-organisational 'ego', thus offering possibilities for change through self-understanding.

Performance and masquerade

In further sections of the book, Fawkes draws on sociology, philosophy and communication studies to develop a more nuanced understanding of why PR portrays itself in the way it does, and why this is an unhealthy state of affairs. For instance, in delving into PR's inner workings, Fawkes also engages with the outer, that is to say, how PR sets about presenting itself, and its client-organisations, to the world. Here, Fawkes draws on sociologist, Erving Goffman, whose work has found even greater purchase since the rise of social media. Fawkes applies Goffman's dramaturgical language – front stage, back stage, 'face', and scripts – to illustrate how a gulf so often arises between PR's performative intent and impressions received by PR's audiences.

But what precisely is PR performing? And how does it do so? This is the charge at the centre of the book, says Fawkes: namely that PR "has contributed to a culture of illusion, through the management of appearances, the creation of stories, images, characters, personae and narratives for brands, charities, transnational corporations and individuals. The teller of the best story 'wins'" (2023, p. 76). Here, Fawkes draws usefully on philosopher, Mikail Bakhtin (whose work has had a few outings in PR scholarship, see e.g. Capizzo, 2018, and Weaver, 2010) to describe PR activity as storytelling. In the social media era, the term 'storytelling' has become the *mot juste* to describe PR activity. But Fawkes argues that settling for this simple descriptor is to miss the reality of what is going on. PR activity is instead one gigantic masquerade culture, she argues, a cacophony of competing narratives and pseudo-events.

Here, almost inevitably, I return to Trump, mainly because Fawkes does so herself. She points to the "cacophony of competing stories" in the US public sphere over the past decade, which successfully created a "masquerade of relative realities", where to say Trump won the 2020 election was "as valid as saying he lost it" (2023, p. 86). The cacophony has only grown louder in the second Trump presidency.

Digital speed and neoliberal capitalism

Of course, PR's inability to pause for self-reflection is exacerbated by the speed and constant responsiveness required in the digital era when the proliferation of communication (to which we must now include the growing mountain of 'AI slop') gives many organisations and their PR advisers little room to breathe. One New Zealand practitioner makes this point acutely when she describes the sheer exhaustion of running twice as hard to stay in the same place as the media landscape shifts like a kaleidoscope. When it comes to PR storytelling, she laments, there are just "So. Many. Places. To. Pitch" from "Substack" to "podcasts, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn" to "my niece's daycare newsletter" (Boswell, 2025).

We could blame successive advances in digital technologies for PR's schizophrenic nature. But Fawkes is keen to highlight a further, all-encompassing feature of PR's DNA. Bringing together work by philosopher, Slavoj Žižek and communications theorist, Shiv Ganesh, Fawkes contends that neoliberal capitalism forces both organisations *and* consumers to be narcissistic. Narcissistic consumers are concerned with justifying their existence through the next new trend or purchase. Meanwhile, narcissistic organisations are more concerned with justifying their existence than with serving the public good. Situated between these two narcissistic forces, modern public relations has little chance to rise above such self-absorption, suggests Fawkes. In this sense, the book is also a critique of neoliberal capitalism itself.

Conclusion: Depth remedies

So what are the key takeaways from *Depth Public Relations*? It is a book intent on exposing common fallacies in public relations' literature and approaches to society, including the self-deluding insistence that PR only operates "in the interests of social good". Such conclusions are hardly new. Fawkes worries that there are too many ideas in the book, and perhaps there are. She worries too that PR, as "the driver of so many 'impressions'" may, in the final analysis, be "unable to demystify its own products" (2023, p.166).

Yet Fawkes' psychoanalytical frame does put forward something provocative, namely that PR's very insistence on its role as a social force for good may be a desperate attempt to avoid the ethical challenges inherent in the practice. Coincidentally, as I was concluding this piece, I came across a *Guardian* column by Australian brand strategist and lecturer, Richard Healey, who has much the same thing to say about the marketing profession. Healey (2025) argues that 'Marketing's "woke" rebrand has ultimately helped the far right. Marketing, says Healey, started out by focusing primarily "on brands' features and tangible benefits". But as consumer society evolved, marketing moved on to symbolic benefits, identities, lifestyles. Ultimately, marketing began selling "values" and "brand purpose". It was at this stage of professional conceit that marketing "started to lose the plot", says Healey. "By making purchasing decisions moral declarations", marketers sold the idea that the world can be self-corrected "through consumption" (Healey, 2025). As Fawkes argues in her book, such narcissism now underlies our global political economy. Meanwhile, Healey's marketing column represents *precisely* the sort of introspection Fawkes calls for in public relations.

Shadow work is painful, says Fawkes, but now is the time.

+++++++

References

Boswell, O. (2025, 18 March). “I don't really know how else to say this, but recently I've had an overwhelming desire to quit PR”, *LinkedIn.* https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7307596874641813504/

Capizzo, L. (2018). Reimagining dialogue in public relations: Bakhtin and open dialogue in the public sphere, *Public Relations Review,* 44 (4) 523-532, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.07.007.

Fawkes, J. (2015). *Public relations ethics and professionalism: The shadow of ethics,* Abingdon: Oxon, Routledge.

Fawkes, J. (2023). *Depth public relations: After the masquerade,* Abingdon: Oxon, Routledge.

Healey, E. (2025). Marketing’s ‘woke’ rebrand has ultimately helped the far right, *The Guardian*, 5 April. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/apr/05/marketing-advertising-industry-far-right-activism

Weaver, C.K. (2010). Carnivalesque activism as a public relations genre: A case study of the New Zealand group Mothers Against Genetic Engineering, *Public Relations Review,* 36 (1) 35-41, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.09.001.