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Public Relations: A Brief Selective History

Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud, did not invent public relations, but he was the first to think through both its operational necessities and procedures, and – in a series of writings – to reflect on its place in society and the tasks which he believed the developing society presented to it.

Urban society, he thought, bred individualism: he wrote that in the cities of Greece, ‘with the increase in the status and power of the individual came a refusal to accept blindly the untrammelled authority of nobility and the pronouncements of religion’ (Bernays 2011). Public opinion, he wrote, had been in embryo in Greek and Roman societies but blossomed just before and during the French Revolution and in the Enlightenment.

He quotes Abraham Lincoln’s remark – during one of his 1858 debates with the Democratic Presidential candidate Stephen Douglas, in Ottawa (Illinois) – that ‘public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail. Without it nothing can succeed’ (manifestly wrong: disastrous wars and failed grand projects have been powered by public sentiment).

Democratic mass societies must have leaders who campaign actively for their policies – who ‘engineer consent’ as Bernays (1947) put it. The phrase has acquired a pejorative connotation, and has haunted Bernays’s memory ever since.

He seems to have meant it in two ways. One was that there could and should be an identity of interest between capital and labour, governing and governed: and that identity must be ‘engineered’ by public relations, since public approval is essential for every large project. But the people should take part in freely debating the large issues, since this ‘engineering ... is the very essence of the democratic process, the freedom to persuade and suggest’. Public relations, in its early days as in its later ones, has as one of its public justifications that it can replace *force majeure* with negotiation and agreement.

No PR executive would use such a phrase today: and the imperative which Bernays and others genuinely believed lay behind the development of the trade – that a society of individuals will fall into chaos if consent is not engineered – is not presently part of the lexicon of mature democratic societies, though it is in developing ones. Today, however, PR agents increasingly do take a lead from Bernays when they promise to protect a client's 'licence to operate'.

PR as social democracy

Bernays's assumption is that the 'engineering', especially by government, is done for the public's own good, and that it is a matter of getting the public to understand and accept it. This was not a rogue idea: indeed, it was derived from President Theodore Roosevelt himself, whom Bernays mentions approvingly in *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (2011) as one of the first politicians to use public relations as a means of achieving progressive ends – he argued in the Congress that 'much can be done by the government in labour matters merely by giving publicity to certain conditions' (he had in mind the condition of miners, which had been publicised in the Colorado mining strike of that year).

This view – that the state could be a force for the righting of wrongs and for the civic education of ordinary people – was a popular one, especially on the democratic left, for much of the twentieth century: and it lay behind a significant part of early public relations, in the US and especially in the UK, and later elsewhere.

It is a long way from public relations' present reputation (though not its practice) that some of its roots are as much in leftist politics as in capitalist corporations. In a study of the development of PR in the UK, Scott Anthony (2008) writes that, in the 1920s and 1930s, when the profession was establishing itself in the UK, it was 'driven by a progressive faction [...] Public relations [...] was an imaginative process of arbitration which wove competing demands into a form which best served a bureaucratic definition of the national interest.'

The conception of many of the profession's early leaders in the two largest anglophone countries was that their task was as much to inform citizens of their rights and to convince them of what was good for them as it was to stimulate desires for products and services.

An outstanding example was the work, in documentary film in the UK and later in Canada, of John Grierson, which sprang from this belief

in the educative, even liberating, effect of public relations. Grierson, like Bernays before him, was seized by the idea – which he took from the US writer Walter Lippmann's 1922 book *Public Opinion* – that democracy was threatened by the complexity of modern life, which effectively 'disenfranchised' most people because they could not understand the society and the politics of which, allegedly, they were the democratic masters. The antidote, he believed, was a popular press which explained complex issues clearly: and the new popular medium, film.

In both the US and the UK at least, politicians believed that clear, popularly presented information would radically change behaviour and mould new citizens. Both Presidents Theodore (1901–9) and Franklin Delano (1933–45) Roosevelt believed it, and took a close interest in furthering it. The post-war Labour government in the UK thought it was creating a new, socialist, moral society: for that, as the prime minister Clement Attlee told his 1948 conference, society needed 'a higher standard of civic virtue than capitalism. It demands a conscious and active participation in public affairs.'

Stephen Taylor, a senior government aide, wrote in *The Times* in October 1945 that 'if [the citizen] is to know what Parliament has done in his name, and what part he has in the post-war social structure, he must be told and told repeatedly in language he can understand. This is not socialist propaganda but simply a condition of the survival of democracy' (quoting Jay 1937).

Thus the government created and expanded the role of public relations in its departments, and through the Central Office of Information. As it came under greater pressure from a population impatient at the continuation of wartime controls and rationing, and as the novelty of and gratitude for innovations like the National Health Service wore thinner, the tempo of the 'explanations' of government policy speeded up: according to Martin Moore in his study of the period, 'as the communication increases in complexity and becomes more staged, so it shifts further from its original essence and becomes less democratically justifiable. Presentation is consciously separated from policy and communication becomes less about informing and explaining and more about persuading and directing' (2006).

The PR executive as the reporter's friend

Walter Lippmann, who was a respected authority in the interwar and post-war periods on public policy and the role of the media, saw that journalism was not a matter of reporting 'the facts' but of reporting what he called a 'stylized' version of them – that is, the facts given a narrative shape. In a passage in his *Public Opinion* (1997), he writes of the issue of bad working conditions (in this case at Pittsburgh Steel) to argue that to make a proper accounting of the conditions would take a team of investigators, many days of research, and 'fat volumes' of print. Newspapers could not attempt such a project, and thus 'the bad conditions as such are not news, because in all but exceptional cases, journalism is not a first hand report of the raw material. It is a report of that material after it has been stylized [i.e. given a narrative shape]'.

If journalism is 'the first draft of history' then public relations is the first draft's first draft. Lippmann provides a firm base for public relations, by rooting it in the needs of hard-pressed newspapermen and women, seeking with too little time to fit too many stories into spaces too exiguous for too much complexity. He also makes it clear that the 'publicity man', taking a fee from a client, cannot be expected to be other than his mouthpiece.

Since, in respect to most of the big topics of news, facts are not simple, and [...] it is natural that everyone should wish to make his own choice of facts for the newspaper to print. The publicity man does that [...] But it follows that the picture which the publicity man makes for the reporter is the one he wishes the public to see. He is censor and propagandist, responsible only to his employers, and to the whole truth responsible only as it accords with the employer's conception of his own interest.

The development of the publicity man is a clear sign that the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given a shape by somebody ... (Lippmann 1997)

Giving newspaper reporters and editors comprehensible narratives was the main – for some the only – job of the PR man for much of the twentieth century: Tim Burt, one of the most acute of today's UK practitioners, writes that 'for most of the last century, PR was built on the simple tasks of salesmanship and persuasion, underpinned by feudal loyalty to clients' (2012).

The PR executive as stunt man

The ‘feudal loyalty’ – which Burt and others would claim is much lessened today – was evident in the early practitioners, including Bernays, who, ‘hired to sell a product or service, instead sold whole new ways of behaving’ (Tye 1998). These varied from the small to the large: tasked by the hairnet company Venida, hit by new fashions for short hair, Bernays started a campaign for women at work to wear nets both to stop it being caught in machinery, and to keep it out of food products; on the other side, he paid leading actresses to endorse the beauty of long hair.

Ivy Lee, a Princeton-educated Methodist minister’s son from Georgia, is usually bracketed with Bernays as a founding pioneer of the trade. Like Bernays, his actions – and thus his reputation – have light and dark sides. He could be ruthless in putting out one-sided, even mendacious material; yet he sought to persuade clients of the need for more openness, and even for better conditions for their workers. In the 1920s, he sought to portray the Soviet Union in a positive light; in the 1930s, he worked to advise the German chemical company IG Farben on how to moderate the bad press which the Nazi regime received: not for the first or last time in his use of this form of rationale, Lee argued that he was working through the company to persuade Hitler to reform.

Lee was credited (at least by himself) as having told the heir to the Standard Oil fortune to ‘tell the truth because sooner or later the public will find out anyway’ – advice which is the more resonant today, as we’ll see. He’s routinely cited as one of the largest influences on PR – sometimes credited with being more powerful, through his work in mending broken reputations and in handling crises, than Bernays.

Both Bernays and Lee knew that they had to attract the attention of the press. Thus they organised visits, shows, and stunts which made news, ensuring that the client or the product became part of journalism, rather than advertising. This basic practice has been followed ever since: only now is it changing, though not disappearing.

The PR executive as counsellor

Although public relations often proclaims its entrepreneurial lineage, it owes a good deal to state activism, and to disasters. In *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, Bernays credits Teddy Roosevelt’s policies, but also the use of

propaganda (not then a pejorative) in the First World War, and the financial crash of the late 1920s which ‘destroyed the voice of business – and gave great acceleration to professional public relations activity’.

Neither Lee nor Bernays left large companies as their legacies: the rapid postwar growth was based on US firms like Burson-Marsteller, founded by the PR man Harold Burson and the advertising man William Marsteller; Hill & Knowlton, with its roots in the 1930s, founded by John Hill, a former financial writer, and Donald Knowlton, a bank’s PR man; and Edelman, founded by the former sports reporter Daniel Edelman (now run by his son Richard).¹

The most successful PR executives have ever been those who could forge a strong relationship with one at or close to the top of the organisation they were promoting. In some industries – especially those exposed to the public gaze, such as consumer products companies – this takes the form of an in-house communications chief or the head of an agency contracted to the company.

The rise of the flack

Political communications grew in parallel to corporate PR, and can be close to their corporate brethren, with personnel shifting between the two continually: Burson-Marsteller, for example, has been headed in the past decade by Mark Penn and Don Baer, both of whom worked in communications at the Clinton White House. Jake Siewert, now at Goldman Sachs, was also a White House veteran. The techniques both differ and coincide. The flack – so-called because he absorbs incoming fire from political journalists – has, at least in the US, become much more powerful in the past two decades, as the political parties have declined and the need for media strategies has become central.

Like public relations, too, it is as old as the trade on which it depends: where there has been politics, there have been fixers, seeking to smooth the way for policies, denigrate opponents, and give shape to the central figure’s programme and appeal. James Harding (2008: 6) sees the trade as a ‘business opportunity [existing] in the shortcomings of politicians’, and locates an early practitioner in democratic times in the London-born John Beckley, who ‘was one of the first to go negative: he claimed George Washington had stolen public funds and called for his impeachment’.

The better, the worse

The more sophisticated PR became, the more it was seen as acting unambiguously for the worse. A slew of books which grappled with the great spread of PR and political consulting in the 1950s and into the 1960s – as corporations took on larger and larger PR staffs and first the Republicans and then the Democrats hired increasingly expensive advisers to their campaigns – looked at the changes with deeply hostile eyes. This view of PR and political communications has remained strong, though it has somewhat diminished now as PR becomes more powerful and ubiquitous, and is used by non-governmental organisations with humanitarian and liberal aims.

Among the earliest of these works was Vance Packard's influential 1957 polemic, *The Hidden Persuaders*: in it, he described how 'political hucksters' were now treating voters as spectator-consumers, not much interested in politics or its content, able to be roused only by controversy, stunts and personality. This approach seemed justified, Packard wrote, 'by the growing evidence that voters could not be depended on to be rational. There seemed to be a strong illogical or non-logical element in their behaviour, both individually and in masses' (Packard 2007).

As Packard discovered in his research, this had been happily accepted by the commercial world which was abreast of the new approach – and which was exporting its techniques to the political communicators. He quotes an editorial in an early 1956 edition of the magazine *The Nation's Business*, published by the US Chamber of Commerce, which reported:

Both parties will merchandise their candidates and issues by the same methods that business has developed to sell goods [...] no flag-waving faithfuls will parade the streets. Instead corps of volunteers will ring doorbells and telephones [...] radio spot announcements and ads will repeat phrases with a planned intensity. Billboards will push slogans of proven power [...] candidates need [...] to look 'sincerely at the TV camera'. (Packard 2007)

It was an early intimation of the replacement of political parties (the 'faithfuls') by public relations, a movement which has since advanced.

The same year, a retired advertising executive, John Schneider, wrote *The Golden Kazoo* (1956), a novel which with a fair degree of prescience

described the 1960 election, where the image-makers have taken over, viewing candidates as ‘the merchandise’ and the electorate as ‘the market’. Schneider pictures the winning candidate as having a pregnant wife: Jackie Kennedy learned she was pregnant (with John F. Kennedy junior) shortly after the 1960 presidential election campaign began.

Television was the game changer here: it was kind to John Kennedy in 1960, harsh on the more experienced Richard Nixon: in his *The Powers That Be*, the chronicler of this period, David Halberstam (2000), wrote that Kennedy was the first successful product of a politics which thought about their candidate in televisual terms, rather than only in terms of party loyalty, or length of experience, or even policy positions. The intellectuals and academics, and many in politics and journalism, saw this trend as more or less uniformly bad: most magisterially, the historian Daniel Boorstin, Librarian of Congress 1975–87, wrote in *The Image* (1997) that advertising allied to the media, especially television, had flooded the public sphere with ‘pseudo events’, happenings which are created by advertising people or journalists for the purpose of being reported or reproduced. ‘The question: “is it real?” is less important than “is it newsworthy?”’ (Boorstin 1997).

In a sustained piece of passionate writing at the end of his book, Boorstin writes:

we are threatened by a new and peculiarly American menace [...] the menace of unreality. The threat of nothingness is the danger of replacing American dreams by American illusions [...] we are the most illusioned people on earth. Yet we dare not become disillusioned because our illusions are the very house in which we live; they are our news, our heroes, our adventure, our forms of art, our very experience. (1997)

In sum

- PR has, since it took on an organised form, been split between differing objectives – engineering social and political outcomes, persuading both the masses and specific stakeholder groups, mediating between opposing groups, and providing a service to the public.
- PR executives have always sought to give a coherent and accessible account of events, personalities, and institutions, formed in part from

the facts, in part from the need to attract attention and to persuade, in part from the demands of the client.

- PR executives have always tried to get close to and to influence the heads of the institutions for which they work – and they have always tried to get close to and attract the interest of the news media. Political communications use many of the same techniques – and political communicators are necessarily always very close to the politician or official for whom they work.
- PR has always attracted odium, often from journalists, who depend on it most. From the 1950s, this took a stronger form in the writings of commentators and sociologists, often of the left, who saw the profession as mendacious and manipulative, a view which has remained.

