

The Birth of Public Relations

Note: The main source for this history is PR! A Social History of Spin by Stuart Ewen, BasicBooks, 1996. Page numbers (in brackets) refer to Ewen's book.

1. From the end of the American civil war in 1865 to the beginning of the First World War, the United States went through a series of social and economic upheavals that in some ways, parallel those of today. Huge corporations began to control an increasing share of national wealth and natural resources. John D. Rockefeller's *Standard Oil Trust* for example, was able to seize control of 90 per cent of the oil and gas industry. This concentration of corporate financial power coupled with vicious anti-union policies generated public anxiety among the middle class. "For the customary, localized middle classes — small businessmen and others who saw themselves as being overshadowed and rendered obsolete — the disdainful conduct of 'robber barons' and the palpable encroachments of giant enterprises were particularly loathsome. A sense that their world was being torn asunder and that they were being rapidly propelled toward indigence began to fester among their ranks. In response to the transgressions of corporate monopoly and large-scale industrialization, the search to restore social and economic stability to their lives — *to bring order to the life of the nation* — emerged as a middle-class obsession." (Pg. 41)

2. This middle-class reaction to the increasing concentration of wealth and privilege gave rise to a new brand of journalism, described by President Theodore Roosevelt as "muckraking." "From the 1870s onward, in response to the social pandemonium of industrialization, a growing assembly of middle-class Americans sought to provoke a new national dialogue. At the center of this assembly, a number of influential journalists took on the role of 'Progressive publicists,' drummers on behalf of social reform. The excesses of big business, the aggregate explosion of social misery and the sense of impending social catastrophe provided abundant materials for their incensed jeremiads. It was the increasingly distraught and doubtful middle class that provided the audience for these Progressive agitators." (Pg. 44)

3. "Progressive journalism, at its core, was committed to breaking the wilful secrecy of power by providing fact-filled exposés of institutional corruption and greed." (Pg. 50)

4. Another factor added to middle class anxiety: "From 1880 to 1910 there was a large growth in immigration to the United States. But there was an even more rapid change in the principal sources of immigrants, from north-west Europe to areas of eastern and southern Europe that were relatively depressed both economically and culturally. By 1890 some popular concern had developed about the impact of so many (often illiterate) newcomers, with their foreign languages and foreign customs, on American society."¹ After 1909, the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) began organizing and fighting for thousands of immigrant workers who were earning 'destitution' wages and living in overcrowded slums.

5. The Progressives believed that facts could influence public opinion and that public opinion itself could force political and economic change. However, the 'public' of this era was crucially different from the traditional notion of the 'public' during the 18th century Enlightenment. The

¹Taking The Risk Out Of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty by Alex Carey, University of Illinois Press, 1997, p. 38.

Enlightenment public — male and middle class — met to discuss issues and to debate ideas. The 19th century American middle class public had retreated into the privacy of the family home which was seen as a shelter against the increasing corruption, dirt, strife and uncertainty of industrial society. “Whereas social optimism, civic engagement and a pristine faith in reason had been the birthmarks of the late eighteenth-century public, individual anxiety, a sense of impending chaos, and guarded habits of insularity enveloped middle-class life a hundred years later. The geographic segregation of classes had reformulated the topography of the urban map, and the parlour had replaced the square as the locus of middle-class life. This was an increasingly privatized public, one that was experiencing ‘public life’ from afar — as spectators.” (Pg. 52)

6. Newspapers, like other businesses in this era, were also getting steadily larger and dependent on huge amounts of capital to buy and run their increasingly expensive printing technologies. “Newspapers like nearly everything else, were becoming embroiled in giant enterprise...The distributions of individual newspapers multiplied, and with the flowering of large newspaper chains, led by E.W. Scripps, people in a wide diversity of locales, were being provided on a daily basis, with congruous constructions of reality. Powerful commercial locomotives, newspapers and news chains, linked further by the expanding information network of the wire services, transported standardized news, information and editorial perspectives through what was fast becoming a national media culture.” (Pg. 53)

7. “By the early 1890s...trends that had overhauled newspapers began to transform magazines as well. Changes in the art of printing — glazed paper made from wood pulp, much cheaper than rag-paper, and an advance in photography followed by improvements in the art of printing photographs, permitted the inexpensive production of opulent magazines.” (Pg. 54) Between 1900 and 1912, some magazine circulations reached one million. Many magazines specialized in “muckraking” investigative journalism. “...the ability to assemble huge audiences was not merely an outcome of financial or technical innovation. The capacity to draw a crowd was also grounded in a new journalistic idiom that was breezy, worldly and — following yellow journalism’s lead — sensationalistic. [These magazines] were designed to entertain a home-centered audience with titillating stories and pictures of the world at large. Photographs were employed with ‘liberal extravagance,’ and features provided gossip about ‘actresses or queens, or persons deemed socially important.’ Another important piece of the new magazines’ entertainment formula was ‘muck-rake’ journalism.” (Pg. 54)

8. Progressive and/or muckraking journalism had achieved considerable success in the early years of the century. U.S. voters “brought a generation of Progressive politicians into office, locally and nationally in the years between 1900 and 1914.” But this success was double-edged. This new American ‘public’ “was defined increasingly by its vulnerable condition of isolation and spectatorship. Readers of mass-circulation newspapers and magazines were witnesses to society, no longer within the public square, but from the sanctuary of their parlours. Unable to imagine any longer the existence of a powerful and socially-engaged public, Progressive writers began to wander from a faith in the lucid powers of fact and public reason. In the absence of a participatory public sphere, morality plays, pitting good against evil, stories imbued with what (journalist) Lincoln Steffens would describe as a tone of ‘astonishment, shame and patriotic indignation,’ appeared to touch a spectator-audience more effectively than mere factual recitations of social conditions. Here, at the fateful crossroads joining mass-circulation journalism with the atomized and anxious middle-class readership, a conception of truth

predicated on rational public discourse encountered another manner of truth, one confirmed — more and more — by graphic overtures to private emotion.” (Pg. 59)

9. Growing concern among Progressive elites that the public was being fed too much negative publicity. (See George. W. Alger writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1907 — pg. 58). Journalist Walter Lippmann also began to worry and he turned to the social sciences for answers to social problems. “Social improvement, Lippmann concluded, would be the fruit of applied social science more than of mobilized public outrage.” (Pg. 64)

10. French thinker Gabriel Tarde developed the idea that *the public not the crowd* would be the social group of the future. Tarde believed that people’s opinions and conversations were no longer grounded in the immediacy of their lives but were increasingly shaped and determined by an expanding media system.

11. German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies wrote that the newspaper had become an unprecedented machine for the manufacture and marketing of public opinion: “In this form of communication, judgments and opinion are wrapped up like grocers’ goods and offered for consumption in their objective reality.” (Pg. 70) The modern press had become a potential instrument of social order.

12. Big business begins to fight back: In 1903, newspaperman Ivy Lee founded a bureau to give advice to the captains of industry including John D. Rockefeller. Much of Lee’s work consisted of distributing news stories favourable to his clients to newspapers. But his efforts to build good will and a good reputation were undermined by the unwillingness of Big Business owners to change their autocratic ways.

13. New thinking from AT&T: In 1903, AT&T hired the Publicity Bureau in Boston to help with its campaign to construct a huge privately-owned monopoly to provide American telephone service. AT&T faced several hurdles:

- there was much public hatred of big monopolies
- there were widespread calls for a publicly-owned phone system similar to the postal service
- AT&T faced competition from many local, independent phone companies.

AT&T often received hostile press coverage favouring its opponents. The company adopted a deliberate policy of buying ads to ingratiate itself with newspaper owners and editors. Coverage improved but AT&T still wasn’t satisfied. It set up its own Information Department and developed several new strategies:

- AT&T raised long distance rates — mainly paid by businesses — so that it could offer relatively cheap local rates to middle-class customers.
- Although AT&T was run by a male hierarchy, the company decided to hire female operators so that the ‘woman’s touch’ would make ‘Ma Bell’ seem friendlier.
- AT&T adopted relatively generous wage and benefits policies.
- The company’s new Public Relations Bureau started monitoring and collecting newspapers, magazines and books on issues affecting telephone companies and it

monitored all of its opponents to find out what they were saying. Weekly intelligence summaries were distributed to all AT&T executives.

- The company arranged debates on the question of public ownership and recruited prominent local people to speak about the benefits of a privately-owned monopoly. AT&T helped speakers by supplying them with debating kits.
- AT&T launched an advertising campaign to persuade individual subscribers that they were part of a *national system*. Slogans included: “When you lift the Bell receiver, you are in contact with the world.” “Every Bell Telephone is the Center of the System.” “One System, One Policy, Universal Service.” (Pp. 85-101)

14. President Woodrow Wilson sets up the Committee for Public Information to promote U.S. involvement in the First World War. The CPI was established in April 1917, one week after the U.S. entered the war. Ewen calls it a “vast propaganda ministry” and a House of Truth. The Progressive journalist George Creel became director of the CPI. Wilson and other U.S. politicians were worried about widespread opposition to the war and the loyalty of the many immigrants who had been allowed in as cheap labour and had ended up in tenements and slums.

15. Among other things, the CPI:

- used 150,000 local speakers to give short speeches at movie theatres — they were known as the “Four-Minute Men”;
- the CPI produced the *Four-Minute Man Bulletin*, an instructional newsletter outlining the topic of the week and providing detailed guidelines for theatre speakers;
- the CPI’s Domestic Section set up its Division of News to channel “official war news” press releases through the mails and along telegraph lines on a 24-hour basis;
- the CPI’s Foreign Section was established in more than 30 countries and used naval transmitters to “pour a steady stream of American information into international news channels of communication”;
- the CPI distributed syndicated “human interest” stories aimed at readers who skipped over the news columns;
- the CPI published its own newspaper, the *Official Bulletin* to distribute news to public officials, other newspapers and any other “agencies of a public or semi-public character equipped to disseminate the official information;
- the CPI conscripted every advertising man in the U.S. to help it produce ads and billboards (newspapers were pressured to donate free ad space);
- the CPI set up a Division of Pictorial Publicity and a Bureau of Cartoons which published the *Weekly Bulletin for Cartoonists*, a newsletter sent to 750 newspaper cartoonists containing ideas and captions that cartoonists were expected to provide drawings for;
- the CPI set up a Division of Films to produce feature films such as *Pershing’s Crusaders*, *America’s Answer*, *Under Four Flags* and others for worldwide theatrical distribution;
- the CPI enlisted academics to write “authoritative” pamphlets on behalf of the war;

- the CPI set up exhibitions at state fairs and produced 200,000 slides and photos for exhibition in schools, churches and other community centres. (Pp. 102-127)

Ewen writes: “Within 24 hours of the Armistice, the CPI was summarily dismantled...Yet the experiences gained in the CPI and its general lessons about the terrain of the public mind would inform the concerns of public relations specialists and affect the contours of American cultural life for decades to come.” (Pg. 127)

16. Journalist Walter Lippmann laid much of the theoretical groundwork for modern theories of propaganda and public relations. “...Lippmann argued that the average person was incapable of seeing [the] world clearly, much less understanding it.” (Pg. 147) Lippmann believed that ordinary people could understand the complexities of social, political and economic life only through mutually shared stereotypes. Lippmann worried that political and business leaders and the experts who advised them would not be able to govern effectively unless they resorted to the ‘management of perception’ and the “manufacture of consent.” (Pp. 146-151)

17. Ewen quotes from Lippmann’s 1922 book Public Opinion to support his idea that images (and especially movie images) have the power to overwhelm critical thinking: “Photographs have a kind of authority over the imagination to-day, which the printed word had yesterday, and the spoken word before that. They seem utterly real. They come, we imagine, directly to us without human meddling, and they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable. Any description in words...requires an effort of memory before a picture exists in the mind. But on the [movie] screen the whole process of observing, describing, reporting and then imagining, has been accomplished for you.” (Pg. 153)

18. “Educated by the lessons of the image culture taking shape around him, Lippmann saw the strategic employment of media images as the secret to modern power; the means by which leaders and special interests might cloak themselves in the ‘fiction’ that they stand as delegates of the common good. The most compelling attribute of symbols he asserted, was the capacity to magnify emotion while undermining critical thought, to emphasize sensations while subverting ideas. (Pg. 157)

19. Edward L. Bernays tried to find practical applications for Lippmann’s ideas. Bernays eventually called himself a “counsel on public relations” in imitation of the language of lawyers. He used prominent people to front some of his PR campaigns because he believed they could influence others. For example, he worked on a campaign on behalf of a meat packer to get people to eat more bacon. He used doctors “to say publicly that it is wholesome to eat bacon.” Bernays also believed that PR practitioners needed to study psychology, the media and popular attitudes in designing their campaigns. (Pp. 163-170)

20. Bernays on “news”: “If at the turn of the [20th] century, ‘news’ had been understood as a faithful extension of an *objective* world, Bernays approached ‘news’ as an essentially *subjective* category, something that took place — and could be generated — in the pliant minds of the audience at whom a parcel of information was being directed. If news had once been understood as something out there, waiting to be covered, now it was seen as a product to be manufactured, something designed and transmitted to bring about a visceral public response.” (Pg. 171)

21. The following observations are from V.O. Key, professor of government at Harvard, commenting on the growth of public relations in the early 20th century:

Businessmen are a small minority highly vulnerable to political attack...They...have to depend on something other than their votes. They have to use their wits — and their money — to generate a public opinion that acquiesces in the enjoyment by business of its status in the economic order...To gain public favour business associations employ in large numbers public relations experts, those masters of the verbal magic that transmutes private advantage into the public good...[and] continuing propaganda calculated to shape public attitudes favourable toward the business system.²

Public Relations and the News: Daniel Boorstin's concept of pseudo-events

The American historian Daniel Boorstin argues in his book The Image that much of the news consists of “events” created by public relations practitioners. Indeed, nearly every newspaper or broadcast story can be traced back to public relations — whether it be a report based on a speech delivered by the prime minister or the announcement of a mining project undertaken by a private company. Boorstin gives the following example:

The owners of a hotel, in an illustration offered by Edward L. Bernays in his pioneer *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), consult a public relations counsel. They ask how to increase their hotel's prestige and so improve their business. In less sophisticated times, the answer might have been to hire a new chef, to improve the plumbing, to paint the rooms, or to install a crystal chandelier in the lobby. The public relations counsel's technique is more indirect. He proposes that the management stage a celebration of the hotel's thirtieth anniversary. A committee is formed, including a prominent banker, a leading society matron, a well-known lawyer, an influential preacher, and an “event” is planned (say a banquet) to call attention to the distinguished service the hotel has been rendering to the community. The celebration is held, photographs are taken, the

²Quoted by Alex Carey, p.78. From, Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups by V.O. Key, Crowell, New York, 1958, p. 103.

occasion is widely reported, and the object is accomplished. Now this occasion is a pseudo-event, and will illustrate all the essential features of pseudo-events.³

Boorstin writes that the common prefix “pseudo” comes from the Greek word meaning false, or intended to deceive. Therefore, a pseudo-event is not quite real. Boorstin labels it a “new kind of synthetic novelty.”⁴ He goes on to enumerate the characteristics of pseudo-events. He writes that pseudo-events:

- are not spontaneous but are carefully planned to create a desirable effect in the media.
- Pseudo-events are staged primarily to be reported. Therefore their timing and location are arranged for the convenience of the reporting media.
- The success of pseudo-events is measured by how widely they are reported.⁵

Under this definition, pseudo-events include: news conferences and news releases, political scrums, interviews, news leaks, almost everything that happens during election campaigns, political debates, photo opportunities, summit conferences, background briefings, Parliamentary Question Period exchanges, the release of opinion poll results, demonstrations, marches and most political speeches.

The news media co-operate in the staging of pseudo-events because they are a predictable source of easily-gathered news. Pseudo-events minimize the work and worry involved in meeting deadlines and in filling space and airtime. A well staged pseudo-event also helps “package” the news attractively.

Most mainstream Canadian newsrooms receive *Canada News Wire*. The service is free to the news media. It charges government and private-sector clients to publicize their pseudo-events. Its English-language Internet address is: <http://www.newswire.ca/en/>

³The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in American by Daniel J. Boorstin, Atheneum, 1972, pp. 9-10.

⁴Boorstin, p. 9.

⁵Boorstin, pp. 11-12.