

A history of public relations history essay



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It is widely acceptable that public relations emerged from the United States of America, on the global scale in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is because public relations-like activities were discovered in the early days of American settlement as each of the colonies used publicity techniques to attract settlers. Harvard College initiated the first systematic U. S fund-raising campaign in 1641. The campaign was supported by the first fund-raising brochure, entitled New England' First Fruits and in 1758, King's College (now Columbia University) issued the first press release- to announce graduation ceremony.

Public relations techniques were even more prevalent during the American Revolution and all subsequent conflicts or situations when power has been threatened or when public support is needed. Just before the revolution, Samuel Adams initiated what can be called a public relations campaign when he was to communicate dimensions of the Revolutionary War and made use of Liberty Tree that were easily identifiable and arouse emotions (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth & Van Leuven 2004).

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

The history of public relations could also be linked to the ancient Greeks, who had the idea of the " Public Will" and to the Romans, who used the expression " The voice of the people is the voice of God."

It is argued that the efforts of Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire on behalf of Charles James Fox in the 18th century which included press relations, lobbying and, with her friends, celebrity campaigning are precursors to today's public relations.

Public relations could also be traced to some Americans, otherwise known as publicists who specialized in promoting circuses, theatrical performances, and other public spectacles. These are the people who were said to have developed public relations in support of railroads. In fact, many scholars believe that the first appearance of the term “ public relations” appeared in the 1897 Year Book of Railway Literature. One of the publicists was Harry Reichenbach (1882-1931), a New York-based American press agent who promoted movies.

The famous Paul Chabas painting was traceable to Reichenbach. He saw a print in a Chicago art store window and made a deal with the store owner who had not sold any of his 2, 000 prints. Reichenbach had hired some boys to “ ogle” the picture when he showed it to the moralist crusader Anthony Comstock. Comstock was suitably outraged when he saw it. Comstock’s Anti-Vice Society took the case to the court and lost. However, the case aroused interest to the painting, which ultimately sold millions of copies.

Two-prominent names also associated with the emergence of public relations are Ivy Better Lee and Edward Barnays. Ivy Better Lee originated the concept of public relations and established public relations as a vocation. Edward Barnays was the first to teach public relations in a university faculty. In describing the origin of the term Public Relations, Barnays commented, “ When I came back to the United States (from the war), I decided that if you could use propaganda for war, you could certainly use it for peace. And propaganda got to be a bad word because of the Germans ... using it. So what I did was to try to find some other words, so we found the words Counsel on Public Relations”.

Ivy Lee was credited with the development of the modern news release (also called a “press release”). He espoused a philosophy consistent with what has sometimes been called the “two-way street” approach to public relations in which public relations consists of helping clients listen as well as communicate messages to their publics. Lee often engaged in one-way propagandizing on behalf of clients despised by the public, including Standard Oil founder, John D. Rockefeller.

Another scholarly source holds that Bernays was the profession’s first theorist. Bernays drew many of his ideas from Sigmund Freud’s theories about the irrational, unconscious motives that shape human behaviour. Bernays authored several books, including *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), *Propaganda* (1928), and *The Engineering of Consent* (1947). He saw public relations as an “applied social science” that uses insights from psychology, sociology, and other disciplines to scientifically manage and manipulate the thinking and behaviour of an irrational and “herdlike” public. “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society”. In his book titled *Propaganda*, Bernays said: “Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country”.

One of Bernay’s early clients was the tobacco industry. In 1929, he orchestrated a now-legendary publicity stunt aimed at persuading women to take up cigarette smoking, an act that at the time was exclusively equated with men. It was considered unfeminine and inappropriate for women to

smoke; besides the occasional prostitute, virtually no women participated in the act publicly.

Bernays initially consulted psychoanalyst, A. A. Brill for advice, Brill told him: " Some women regard cigarettes as symbols of freedom... Smoking is a sublimation of oral eroticism; holding a cigarette in the mouth excites the oral zone. It is perfectly normal for women to want to smoke cigarettes. Further, the first women who smoked probably had an excess of male components and adopted the habit as a masculine act. But today the emancipation of women has suppressed many feminine desires. More women now do the same work as men do.... Cigarettes, which are equated with men, become torches of freedom".

Upon hearing this analysis, Bernays dubbed his public relations campaign titled: " Torches of Liberty Contingent". It was in this spirit that Bernays arranged for New York City débutantes to march in that year's Easter Day Parade, defiantly smoking cigarettes as a statement of rebellion against the norms of a male-dominated society. Publicity photos of these beautiful fashion models smoking " Torches of Liberty" were sent to various media outlets and appeared worldwide. As a result, the taboo was dissolved and many women were led to associate the act of smoking with female liberation. Some women went so far as to demand membership in all-male smoking clubs, a highly controversial act at the time. For his work, Bernays was paid a tidy sum by George Washington Hill, President of the American Tobacco Company.

The initial purpose of public relations was to counter scathing criticism of business companies and entrepreneurs by writers, journalists and social critics. The business people were accused of shady deals and a general lack of social responsibility. To counter these criticisms, the business companies hired some of their former critics (the journalist in particular) to help polish poor company image. The leading journalist hired was Ivy Better Lee, a reporter for the New York Journal! Ivy Lee enjoyed his client to re-examine their business policies and practices and to correct wrong business attitudes, in order to create a public opinion and generate a more positive image in the press.

In his pursuit of effective "public relations", Lee drew up a "declaration of principle", spelling out the fundamental nature of public relations work. Lee was the first person to be called public relations councillor. He also co-founded the Parker and Lee public relations Agency in 1905.

Public relations crusade in Western Germany was partly led by Guster Mevissen. He proposed that public criticism of business companies should be countered by the greatest possible publicity. Another industrialist, Alfred Krupp, was also known to take public relations very seriously, when he wrote to his representatives to "conduct your business enterprise in the public".

Taking a queue from the business world, the US Government set up a committee on public information to endeavour by "engineering of consent" to convince American Citizens of the need of Americans to be involved in the World War I. The committee was headed by George Creel and also included

Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays. Lee and Barneys jointly published a book titled "crystallizing public opinion" in 1928.

World War II further reflected the success of the First World War's role in forming public opinion. An office of war information was established headed by Elmer Davis, a former radio Newscaster, to bring public opinion more in line with the heads and Pace of government. Many government agencies from then began to have public relations department and sometimes, consultants were hired to study and interpret public opinion on sensitive issues.

GLOBAL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS ORIGIN

From the global historical perspective as well, Public relations emerged as a result of four dominant practices and traditions which include:

Rhetoricians and Press agent Tradition - popularized by speech makers and other promoters who were involved in the work of rhetorics and press agency. The Rhetoricians provided communication services like speechwriting, speaking on behalf of clients, training for difficult questions and persuasion skills. This was believed to have been established in Greece during the Plato's day (ca. 27 to 346 B. C). One of them was Gorgias of Leontinum in Silicy (ca. 483 to 375 B. C) who believed that the job of Rhetoricians was to foster persuasive skills more than it was to determine if arguments and claims were true or false.

Journalistic Publicity Tradition: this was precipitated by the 19th century American Industrial Revolution which hit America with full force. The

resultant industrialization altered the structure of society and made public relations inevitable. The first attempt in this corridor was in Dorman B. Eaton's 1882 address to the graduating class of the Yale Law school.

Persuasive Communication Campaign Tradition- which was rooted in the US publicity and propaganda initiatives on the World War 1.

Relationship-Building and Two-way Communication Tradition: this was popularized by Arthur Page who believed that winning public confidence required not merely ad hoc attempts to answer criticism but a continuous and planned initiatives of positive public relations using institutional advertising and others.