

Preface



Some may wonder why public relations is a deserving topic for the extensive analysis it receives in this encyclopedia. After all, many might think, it is “just PR.” In the view of some or even many, public relations is the art of sham, spin, buzz, sandbagging, and “being nice.” Others fear it as deep-pockets lobbying that gives privilege to powerful companies and special interests. Having said that, some critics and many in the general public might be satisfied. They may take a dismissive attitude. That attitude, however, can be counterproductive. Public relations does not slink into the corner because it is dismissed. It is there to be seen and to exert influence. Thus, engaged and thoughtful analysis of the profession may be required before a final opinion is formed on the ethics and societal role of the practice. Otherwise, critics and students of public relations may make a couple of serious mistakes.

First, a dismissive attitude toward public relations often is based on a narrow and considerably naïve sense of what public relations is and what practitioners do. This sort of flippant dismissal can lead one to miss the darker side of the practice, which indeed adds evidence to support many of those claims. However, such dismissal causes one to avoid considering the reality that when mispracticed, public relations can divert attention from the real issue, giving a false sense of how popular and favorable a product might actually be. Endless public relations efforts exist, some heavily masked or even

dismissed by the half-sibling of public relations, marketing. Thus, when we watch the Super Bowl or the Academy Awards (or any of the endless list of similarly high-profile events), we may fail to recognize the hand of public relations being played. Publicity and promotion are the often silent tools of public relations; some will argue that the best public relations is that which is not recognized as such.

The second mistake is failure to understand that public relations also plays a large role in public policy issue debates. In fact, during the 1970s, when the term *issues management* was coined, that aspect of the practice was started in large part by advertisers who believed that issue advertising could combat the critics of large business activities. This was not a new era in public policy debates. Many senior practitioners had a long reputation of working in the public policy arena. Many believe that the enormous, society-defining debates in the last decades of the 19th century spawned much of the practice as we know it today. But practitioners quickly realized that issue advertising had limited likelihood of appeal and impact as a means of narrowing the chasm between corporate performance and public expectations. In such debates, members of various segments of the general public and opinion leaders may be more interested in the arguments made in a well-crafted editorial or book by an expert—or a feature article—than an advertisement. Thus, the work of the public relations practitioner came to the fore—once again.

Society could exist without public relations, but it won't. This means that public relations, for better or for worse, is here to stay. What we think of as public relations may not be in dispute, but what practitioners do and the good or bad they accomplish will be the subject of debate. The challenge facing the profession of public relations, and the men and women who serve as practitioners, is to earn the trust and respect of critics and the general public. Senior practitioners and academics do not take this challenge lightly.

Public relations gained professional and academic status during the 20th century in the United States and from there it spread to much of the rest of the world. That is the good news. In that regard, public relations in the minds of many people and academics came to be viewed as a positive way for organizations to get their message before markets, audiences, and strategic publics, the critics and supporters of such organizations. In a positive sense, then, public relations helped organizations build mutually beneficial relationships with customers, critics, and other stakeholders. This effort will continue. However, because of its contemporary origins, it has often been associated with propaganda—a label that senior practitioners tend to avoid and reject.

The bad news is that public relations, in the minds of some or many, is the dark art of manipulation and confusion. For some, it is a shifty business. It occurs in the White House as well as board rooms of businesses, nonprofits, and governmental agencies. It has been characterized as “a stealth bomber” that can deliver persuasive messages in ways that get through people's defenses. Seen in this way, public relations can be viewed as a tool that large organizations have and will continue to use to engineer consent. That means that people should not trust public relations or its practitioners if they are sneaky, manipulative, deceptive, and dishonest—if they do not tell the truth, if they engage in spin, or if they are expert sandbaggers and flacks.

The *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* is a vehicle that may help the field to reach a wide array of readers who can serve as opinion leaders for improving the image and ethics of the practice. This

work intends to provide an honest but positively biased treatment of public relations. It strives to give a sound, insightful, and appreciative view of what public relations is and does as well as the ethical challenges it must meet to be seen as a positive force in society. From its launch, this project has been a substantial, even daunting, undertaking. Like all edited projects, this one has been a difficult and exciting journey. The most fascinating part has been wrestling with the list of practitioners who should be featured with their own biographical entries. Talk to 20 senior practitioners and academics, and you will get a list of names they believe deserve recognition in a work such as this. Some people will be on all lists. Some lists will be substantially different. Some people will argue that certain people should not be featured, although others will insist that such a work would be inadequate without them.

Consequently, we created a list of names of extraordinary practitioners who have helped define the profession by what they have said and done. The next problem was getting authors. Many of the people who were qualified to write certain biographical entries deserved entries themselves. So we did some trading. Some potential authors of various entries were not in a mental or physical state to contribute. We even had some people pass beyond this physical existence during the process. Often the “only person” who could write an entry was unable to do so, but never unwilling. For the subjects of some entries, documents and other source materials simply were not available or were in storage somewhere unknown to the authors. In some crucial instances, the person featured in the entry was mentally or physically unable to provide additional information.

Out of these difficulties, however, we did find worthy entries and came to see this document as the most authoritative reference source on many of the persons who crafted the profession in the 19th and 20th centuries. In finding subjects and authors, we were even able to reach beyond the boundaries of the United States and feature key players in other countries, such as Great Britain and Germany. Public relations neither started in the United States nor does it reside exclusively there. So we were

fortunate to give voice to the presence of the practice and key practitioners in other countries.

Still, there are omissions. Some will never be recovered. Facts get lost in time. We were fortunate, if for no other reason than this, to undertake this project when we did. The lives and careers of these pioneers are fleeting. And most of the people who made the profession what it is today lived and worked in the 20th century.

PUBLIC RELATIONS: WHAT'S IN A TERM?

Other than the people who made their livings from public relations, what is this book about? One of the longest entries is devoted to a terribly inadequate definition of the profession. People in public relations can't universally agree on what the practice constitutes or what the term means. For this reason, the definition of public relations is offered as a dialogue on public relations to help students, practitioners, academics, and people in general appreciate the scope and purpose of the term. If the book helps readers to think about the meaning of the term and consider its many facets, then those of us who contributed to the definition will feel satisfied. We simply don't like the term to be treated as a stereotype. And for the most part, practitioners and academics prefer the term *public relations* to *PR* because the latter is invariably associated with the dark side of the profession.

As long ago as the 1970s, attempts were made to sort out definitions. Senior practitioners such as Edward L. Bernays and John W. Hill had by then published books in which they offered their definitions. By the early 1970s, the term had been defined by the Public Relations Society of America. Several textbook authors had tried their hand at defining the term. Endless efforts at definition have occurred in journal articles and critical comments by journalists.

As is true of many crucial words for professions in society, this one passes through history, professional practice, academic classes, media commentary, and everyday conversations. The passing flows as easily and unstopably as water through cupped hands. It just won't stay put. But just as medicine once was generally referred to as quackery, public

relations practitioners in some circles are known as flacks and journalists are called hacks—a term that was used in that context long before it was made popular in reference to cyber-intruders.

Some practitioners and academics have tracked the various definitions of this wily beast as hunters pursue their prey. Writing in 1977, Dr. Rex Harlow observed, using the start of the 20th century as his benchmark,

A review of the history of the definition of public relations shows that the definition has changed considerably over the past 70 years. This historical review reveals how inextricably the development of the definition has been and is bound to the movement of thought and action of the society in which the public relations practitioner does his [or her] work. It shows the present form, content and status of the public relations definition, but even more the effect of environmental factors and change upon its development during the past quarter of a century. (p. 49)

Without a doubt, then, a discussion of public relations is necessarily a discussion of the society or societies in which it is practiced. We can't discuss this topic without considering the human drama of change, markets, public policies, and the public policy "fistfights" that go along with all of that. We added the word *her* to Harlow's comment because today the public relations professional is more likely to be a woman than a man.

ELEMENTS OF THE PRACTICE AND STUDY: WHAT MAKES UP THE PRACTICE?

One of the goals of this book is to make the practice of public relations more adequately understood by an array of readers, including the general public. For better or worse, public relations plays a vital role in commerce, nonprofit activities, and the processes of government. Movies such as *Wag the Dog* give people a shocking view of how people might be able to manipulate the media by manufacturing news that shapes policy—thereby manipulating what people know, think about, and end up doing. That's a lot of power. It must be guided by a strong sense of professionalism and sound

ethical principles. In the conduct of their business, practitioners have a lot of “tools” in their kits. Each day, they get more. What’s in the tool kit?

Mission/Vision

Organizations craft mission and vision statements to help them know where they are going and to chart their plans to achieve those outcomes. Public relations is a useful tool to help frame missions as well as to accomplish those ends. Also, persons who practice public relations operate out of stated and unstated mission and vision statements. Organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America and the International Association of Business Communicators voice their own mission and vision statements to serve as broad guides for the practice of professional communicators.

Strategies

Perhaps the broadest tools in the kit are strategies. It is here that public relations’ reputation for manipulation is often deserved. One of the strategies available to practitioners is manipulation. Practitioners have made the small seem large, and the large seem small. They create buzz to compete with disinterest. At their worst, they can be masters and mistresses of attracting attention and framing statements—manufacturing reputations and crafting images that may be far from reality. They have created pseudo-events. Many of the entries in this book look at the strategies of public relations.

In a broad sense, some of the strategies include publicizing, promoting, engaging in issue debates, informing, persuading, and working to create mutually beneficial relationships. They can entail negotiation, collaboration, and cooperation.

On the down side, just as practitioners know how to open the flow of information, they also may stop that flow through spin, sandbagging, and diversion. Practitioners may cover up as well as uncover.

Functions

The functions of public relations often are part of the list of services announced by agencies. They

may be job descriptions and divisions in large corporate public relations departments.

Functions are used to accomplish or implement strategies. Thus, for instance, if publicly traded companies are required by the Securities and Exchange Commission to communicate with shareholders, they have an investor relations function.

Nonprofits engage in fundraising or development, a function. All organizations engage in media relations, another function. They may have a customer relations or employee relations function. They may engage in issues management. Universities and colleges have sports information functions, marketing functions, development functions, student relations functions, and so on.

Counseling is a vital function. Counseling is the stock and trade of the senior practitioner. Such persons work to position organizations to help them earn respect and support and to avoid collisions with opinions and competing interests. Acting wisely and ethically, the counselor can help the organization to operate in ways that do not offend the sentiments and expectations of key publics. Engaged in as manipulation, counseling can help an organization to appear to be something quite different from what it is and thereby enable it to earn falsely deserved rewards. In the worst sense, perhaps, such counseling can keep a politician from being found wanting or help a business to seem to be worth much more than shareholders would otherwise suspect.

A function is a broad category of tools to achieve specific strategies for a particular purpose in working with some definable audience, market, or public.

Perhaps the ultimate function of public relations is the creation of meaning. Here also, practitioners and academics confront thorny ethical issues. What meaning needs to be created to help build and maintain mutually beneficial relationships? How can practitioners help shape the meaning that strengthens community through diverse voices and alternative opinions?

Academics tend to look at process more than meaning. Practitioners never forget the importance of meaning. The meaning may center on the favorable attributes of a product or service. Meaning may seek to foster a favorable image of an organization. Employee relationships depend on meaning. So do

donor relationships. The list is long. The challenge is great.

Serious, ethical, and responsible practitioners know they cannot manipulate meaning. Meaning must be based on sound judgment, high ethical principles, and a mutuality of interests.

We may add ethical decision making to the list of functions. That notion may baffle critics. Practitioners, however, are in an excellent position to hold and apply sound, ethical principles to guide the organizations they serve.

Tools and Tactics

How a function works to implement strategies depends on and defines the tools or tactics that are specialized to that function. Thus, for investor relations, one of the tools is the annual financial report. Another tool, used especially by companies that manufacture chemicals, is the health, safety, and environment report.

The media release—what used to be called the press release—is a standard tool practitioners use to feature newsworthy facts and opinions for the use of reporters and editorialists.

Events, or what some call pseudo-events, are vital tools. Many newspapers carry regular features giving the details of some fundraiser. A charity for children might hold a gala to raise funds and honor those who work hard to raise those funds. The practitioner makes sure that a photojournalist gets the obligatory shot of three or four—never more—of the persons who help publicize the event. From the most ancient times, manufactured events have been a vital part of society—business and government administration. That trajectory is unlikely to change soon—if ever.

Press conferences are a counterpart of media releases, as are backgrounders. Practitioners create media kits and groom Web sites. They create 1-800 hotlines and FAQs for Web site home pages.

Practitioners engage in crisis prevention, planning, and response. During a crisis, we like to have practitioners and others help us understand what happened, why it happened, and what we should do. During a hurricane or a chemical release, we like to have emergency plans to execute to know how to be safe. Practitioners help us in these ways.

We may appreciate learning about cures and treatments, as well as the symptoms of ailments. Medical researchers discover medical facts and offer treatments, which professional communicators may publicize and promote.

ONWARD INTO THE FOG—BUT PERHAPS WITH A LANTERN TO LEAD

Public relations as demonstrated in this encyclopedia is timeless. And it is here to stay. Some see it as the essence of a democratic society, where all sides of an issue can be contested, examined, and weighed. But it is also a tool usable by the worst despot to manufacture his or her image and craft support for his or her regime.

Ethics and social responsibility are key concerns of our day and age. That is not new, but corporate scandals and attempts by government officials to manipulate public opinion have emerged as deep concerns. Some observers watch for missteps and call for remedies. But a cynical culture that convinces itself that no one tells the truth and that believes in no one can be even more of a threat to civil society.

As much as it features the positive service and contributions of practitioners, this work also attempts to display the theoretical and ethical concerns that consume academic and professional attention and consideration. Because of the role practitioners have in society, they must be attentive to such concerns. So must the academics who work to shape and guide the profession—as well as educate the next generation of practitioners.

In that vein, the *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* may serve some as a primer. Others may find refreshing or even disappointing comments and concerns. However, we hope the book advances the dialogue that can make the profession ever more healthy. It is here to stay. It serves society best by asking more and more of itself.

—Robert L. Heath

Bibliography

Harlow, R. F. (1977). Public relations definitions through the years. *Public Relations Review*, 3(1), 49–63.