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# Public Relations—A Contemporary Concept

Edward L. Bernays

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## PUBLIC RELATIONS—A CONTEMPORARY CONCEPT

A lecture delivered  
at the Naval War College  
29 March 1962

by

Mr. Edward L. Bernays

Public relations and public opinion have been my vocation and avocation since 1912. I shall hope to share with you what I have learned over these fifty years. I hope, too, to give you suggestions out of my experience to help you deal with problems all of you face in what has aptly been called the "age of public relations." Admiral Austin, a press information officer not so many years ago, wisely asked me to cover five topics that embrace the salient sectors in the field I have devoted my life to. Let me enumerate them.

First, he asked me to discuss public relations—a contemporary concept; second, the importance of good public relations; third, public opinion as a dominant controlling force in our society; fourth, persuasion as an element in effective public relations; and fifth, the techniques of persuasion and the spreading of ideas.

When I was Professor of Public Relations at the University of Hawaii, and at New York University, it took me many hours to cover this ground. But I know from my previous experience at military installations (I used to talk at the public relations school at Fort Slocum and at Harrisburg, and during World War II I talked to the public relations high command of the Army and the Navy) how tight your schedules are, and how high your IQs are. If I touch only on the high

spots, I shall try to compensate by suggesting public relations bibliographies to you so that should you care to follow up, in depth, anything that intrigues your interest, you can pursue it in the literature.

I shall start with definition, in this case the definition of public opinion and public relations. If the communicator, myself, and the people I communicate with agree as to definition, the communications process becomes a two-way instead of a one-way street. I might add parenthetically that much of the communication carried on in the United States is a one-way street.

Let me define public opinion. It is as difficult to define as color. One dictionary calls it the collective opinion around an issue of differences. But to me that definition is too limited. Other definitions I have heard don't define public opinion either. Public opinion is defined as the voice of the people and the voice of God. Pascal, the French philosopher, called public opinion the queen of the world. Hume, the English philosopher, put it in a slightly different way when he said it is an opinion that government is founded. The author of our own American Federalist said, "All government rests on opinion." De Tocqueville said public opinion is the predominant authority in America and that belief in it was a species of religion. These are only generalized statements. They don't really pin down the word. Let me define public opinion tersely here as the active or latent attitude of publics, plural, not singular, on any subject.

Public relations is easier to define. My own definition, written about forty years ago in my book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, defines public relations as covering the entire field of relationships of an organization or individual with the publics on which that organization or individual is dependent. The public relations counsel or consultant,

the practitioner in the field, first determines the adjustment or the maladjustment of an organization [or individual] with its publics. He then offers advice to his client [organization or individual] so that his attitudes and actions may be directed towards his social goals. The public relations counsel thereupon gives information to the public to bring about better understanding by the public of his client. Since we live in a competitive society, he also directs efforts of persuasion at the public to gain acceptance for his client. Public relations, in short, comprises three elements: First, adjustment to the public in attitude and action; second, information directed to the public as a basis for public understanding; and third, persuasion directed to the public.

Whether you are aware of it or not, each of you practices public relations at the command or staff level, for all of you are dependent on other persons for accomplishing your missions effectively.

In your own problems of public relations you can deal with your publics on the basis of your insight, intuition, and experience, as leaders have done through the ages, and as some still do. Or you can deal with your publics on the level of professional public relations, a recognized profession today, an art applied to the social sciences in which the public interest, and not pecuniary motivation, is the primary objective, which is the criterion of other professions—medicine, law, the military. Your public may consist of the men under your command, the public of the community in which you function, the labor or other groups you work with, or the broad general public on whom the future of all of our institutions in this country depend, including, of course, the Navy.

Now, let me take up the first of Admiral Austin's topics: public relations—a contemporary concept. The



phrase *public relations* in itself has changed in meaning since it was first used in 1882 by Dorman Eaton in a talk at Yale's Law School. Then it was merely a pretty phrase to describe a static concept—public relations. In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, public relations stood for the whitewashing activities of public utilities, railroads, streetcars, power and light companies, in their defense against the muckrakers of the Theodore Roosevelt period. Public utilities were blamed for the excesses and abuses of the so-called robber-baron period. Newspaper men and clever writers were hired and whitewashed them in a counterbarrage in newspapers, to meet the muckrakers' attacks. Early in the 20th century, Ivy Ledbetter Lee, a publicity man with clients among the large corporations, stated his new publicity principle for big business, *the public be informed*. Business had taken its keynote from the medieval guilds of England and made secrecy its keynote. But now as a result of the impact of muckraking, Lee made this pronouncement. By the time World War II started, public relations in its one-way street definition, information from the corporation or the institution to the public, was gaining recognition by industry. But fundamentally business was still in its *laissez faire* period, functioning on the policy that what it did was its own business and not the public's concern. It indulged in publicity—but mainly as a defensive measure. President Wilson, when he set up the U.S. Committee of Public Information a week after World War I broke out, had no idea that indirectly this effort would bring about the age of public relations in the United States. His emphasis on democracy and the public—"Make the world safe for democracy" focused attention on the power of public opinion and the public. The successful work of the Committee, aimed at the people in our own country and other countries, gave new visibility to the power of the people. The Committee was the public relations arm of the government with the avowed purpose of building United States morale, winning over the neutrals, and

negating the propaganda of the enemy. I was a staff member of this Committee in this country and in Paris. Historians said the Committee carried out what was perhaps the most effective job of large-scale war propaganda the world had ever witnessed. So much so, that when the war was over the book entitled *Words Won the War* by Mock and Larson was widely hailed as a truthful account of what had happened.

World War I taught the United States the power of having people on our side. It taught us the power of ideas, words, and acts in bringing this about. After the war, it was natural that some of us who had participated in the war effort should recognize the importance of winning the support of public opinion in peacetime pursuits as it had been won for war activities. When I returned from Paris I started a publicity service I called *Publicity Direction*, still based on the one-way street concept of disseminating information about a client to the public. But I found that in an era of expanding public concern and interest in every kind of activity, my concept was too narrow. In 1923 I wrote *Crystallizing Public Opinion* which attempted to define the scope and function of present-day public relations and the public relations counsel. I pointed out that the public and private interests must coincide and I pointed out that good public relations depends not alone on words but on action which deserves public support, and on educating the public to understand these actions. This profession, I said, would advise organizations on how to improve their relations with the public. Public opinion and the public were ready for this activity. From a few practitioners in the United States in the field, the activity expanded and developed rapidly. According to estimates, there are now 100,000 practitioners in every conceivable kind of activity, private and public. Today it is all-pervasive, an important part of policy and practice at every level of government, private industry and nonprofit bodies. Public relations is taught in university courses, with

undergraduate and graduate degrees. It has its literature, periodicals and books, many on specialized topics. It has permeated not only the United States, but other Free World countries as well. Today 32 voluntary associations of public relations people function in as many countries. The United States has its own public relations arm today in the USIA with 1,000 men and a small budget of a little over 100 million dollars.

Unfortunately, public relations men are not licensed, as are doctors or lawyers. Anyone can call himself a public relations counsel and can practice the activity. Naturally, this has meant much marginal and submarginal activity. But the leaders of the profession recognize their responsibility to society, namely that a profession is an art applied to a science and that pecuniary motivation is not the primary consideration in its practice, but that the public interest is. I think you will readily accept the conclusion that public relations as a contemporary concept is a powerful force spread over the entire globe in a period of only forty years.

The second topic Admiral Austin asked me to discuss with you is the importance of good public relationships. We all know that the relations of an organization or individual with the publics upon which it depends can be good, bad, or indifferent. To get to the very roots of the importance of good public relations, I think we will have to examine the nature of our society. You will agree with me that a democratic society as opposed to a Communist or totalitarian society is one in which leadership depends upon the consent of those who are led. In a Communist or totalitarian society, such leadership is maintained by threat, intimidation and various forms of brainwashing, and propaganda. In a democratic society, the public is won over by persuasion, suggestion and information. The public is the dominant and controlling force in the society. Thomas Jefferson once said

that the most important influence in the United States is the individual citizen. It is obvious, therefore, that any leader or institution in the democratic society is dependent on a favorable public and a favorable public opinion. That is why it is important to maintain good relations with the publics on which you are dependent. It is as simple as this—self-preservation. Good public relations carries with it public understanding and usually public support.

In the United States the President runs for election once every four years, but many institutions try for the votes of the people daily, as for instance, the Navy. Our society is so complex today and there are so many causes competing for the attention of the public in the market place of ideas, that to achieve good public relations requires specialized skills, knowledge and understanding. As a navigator you must know how to read the chart of public opinion, and how to navigate the seas of public opinion. The need for expert knowledge in coping with these problems has been greatly increased by the new inventions in mass communication like radio and television, and by the new insights of the social scientists into how public opinion functions, how it is distributed in a particular segment of the population, how it is related to interest groups and group interests, what its properties are—all this makes it important for leaders to know the nature of public opinion and how to deal with it to bring about good public relations.

Now as to the third point—the nature of public opinion and how it functions as a dominating controlling force in our society. Public opinion is more complicated than the simple dictionary definition, my own definition, or poetic statements like "public opinion is the queen of the world." Many social scientists have studied public opinion as it expresses itself dormant or in action. Among such notable students are: Herbert Blumer, Hadley Cantril, Bernard Berelson, Kimball Young, Harold Casswell, George Gallup, Elmo Roper, Seymour Lipset, V.O. Key, Jr.,

and Elmo C. Wilson. In presenting my comments, I am relying on their researches and on some observations of my own. To understand public opinion we need to go back to the individual and group in society. We know the individual has certain compelling drives, for life survival, for propagation—drives caused by his bio-chemical structure and his early conditioning. We know, however, that man is not ruled by his individual personality alone. Man is also a gregarious individual, a member of groups. Formal and informal groups dominate much of his attitudes and actions. Social scientists regrettably have not as yet come up with all the questions about individual and group behavior. But we do know a little about individual behavior and a little about people when they act as a member of groups. I concern myself here only with the attitudes of individuals as members of groups.

Public opinion is a dominant, controlling force in our society. The most obvious way in which public opinion manifests itself is, of course, at elections. Political parties—groups of people with similar political beliefs—provide a platform with planks on which the candidate stands. Free elections give the individual citizen the opportunity to express his wishes at the polls for or against the candidate. Elections do not permit public opinion to express itself on other than the most important issues, but certainly they are one index of how controlling the force of public opinion is in the society. Majority opinion translates itself into choosing leaders of the democracy.

Public opinion manifests itself as a dominant controlling force through legislative bodies which make laws. Theoretically, and often practically, legislative bodies in the civic units that make up our government, respond to their constituencies—public opinion—in town, city, county, state, and on a national level. By and large the generalization holds.

Public opinion manifests itself as a controlling force through the voluntary groups in our society. These interest groups, sometimes pressure groups, through quantitative or qualitative strength, enforce their wishes on legislative bodies and on appointed or elected officials. They may not represent a majority of the public, or a consensus of the public. They represent a powerful expression of public opinion in society. Sometimes they hold the balance of power; sometimes they win by their nuisance value.

The casual relationship between public opinion and action of policy-makers in politics, business or nonprofit institutions is not clearly defined. It is difficult even for an expert to appraise in advance the impact of public opinion on leaders, for despite our democratic tradition, some leaders flout public opinion. It may be worth discussing what social scientists know about public opinion today. This bears on my discussion of topics four and five of Admiral Austin's outline, *persuasion* and the *spreading of ideas*.

I think that many of us make the mistake of treating public opinion as something total and determinant, static and all-inclusive. There is no 100% public opinion that includes every adult in the United States on any one issue. Some issues have a consensus of public opinion back of them, for instance, in favor of liberty, freedom, or against crime. But a minority of opinion exists even about these matters. A great conflict in public opinion exists on some issues; some are quite evenly matched as for instance was shown by the presidential election. On some issues in public opinion, only a relatively few are intensely interested. The issue as to whether Valencia oranges from Spain should be imported without tariff would only arouse the orange farmers of Florida and California.

Public opinion varies in other ways. Social scientists have learned people align themselves along

certain group lines. When you deal with public opinion keep these alignments in mind. People's attitudes may vary with their political party alignment, their age and sex, their socio-economic status, occupation, ethnic origin, their religious or educational background. People sometimes hold clusters of opinion; for instance, a liberal or a conservative attitude may express itself in certain well-defined ways on a cluster of subjects. The man who believes strongly in civil liberties will also believe in international aid to other countries.

There is another attribute of public opinion you will keep in mind in dealing with your publics. Some people hold opinions with great intensity; others with less intensity. Some people have stable opinions; others' opinions are more easily shaken. Some opinions may be active, others latent or dormant. Elmo Roper, a public opinion analyst, estimates that 70% of American opinion is dormant on political issues. Only 10% is politically active, and only 20% takes some part in political issues. You can deduce from this how potentially powerful a small pressure group may become.

How is public opinion formed? Social institutions play their role. Religious and ethnic backgrounds are important. Mass media that bring the printed, spoken and pictorial word to millions are important. But social scientists now express the belief, and I think with reason, (and this may surprise some of you) that the media may not be quite as important as most people believe they are. This is because audiences practice selectivity in the choice of what they read or view. A man will usually read what *a priori* he is disposed to agree with. He will read the *Nation* and the *New Republic* if he believes in their doctrine, or he will read the *National Review* if he believes in theirs. It is relatively simple to reaffirm or intensify the attitudes of people through the use of mass media. But conversion is difficult to accomplish.

Despite popular misconceptions, research in the laboratory has shown that people accept largely, in their reading or listening, only what they *a priori* are willing to accept. People reject what they do not want to believe, and rationalize their rejections—"the newspapers are not telling the truth," "the radio commentator is the tool of these interests," and so on. The media are more important in reinforcing opinion, than in converting it. That doesn't mean that the media are not vitally important in carrying information about actions and deeds that may affect public attitudes.

Two other elements are important in forming public opinion, more important than people think they are. This has been found out by research. One is *personal influence*; a leader's belief is often accepted by his constituency. Deeds are also important in the formation of public opinion, in gaining acceptance for an idea. Colonel Glenn, orbiting the world three times, is a more potent persuasion for our outer space program than any number of handouts for publication.

I shall discuss Admiral Austin's last two topics under the heading of *The Engineering of Consent*, an approach to public relations problems I worked out as a result of my experience with profit and nonprofit organizations, and with government. I found certain generalizations, principles that apply to all problems, just as they do in other professions. I use the words *engineering of consent* to describe a planned approach to winning the approval of people. The approach has to be planned because of the complexity of public opinion, and the psychological and physical means of reaching it. Any public relations problem you face may be dealt with in a six-point planned approach: (1) define your objectives; (2) research public opinion; (3) decide on the strategy to govern your activity; (4) isolate the themes and appeals meaningful to your publics; (5) determine on the



organization to supervise and direct the activity;  
(6) plan your timing and your tactics.

You will note, (and this is true of military activities as well) that tactics always are determined on last and not first. First, you determine your objectives. In public relations you have time objectives, usually immediate, intermediate, and long-time. The nature of your problem will determine the length of these time periods. You have other objectives, the possible modification of the attitudes and actions of your publics. Whom would you like to have think what, or do what about your issue? Define your objectives as concretely as possible. Then the other processes in the engineering of consent will develop logically from them. Don't say you would like the Navy to get intensified support from the public. Try to define what that support should be, what positions you would like the public to take more intensely or less intensely than they are now taking. You might even put it quantitatively. You would like X per cent more of the public to think favorably of the Navy's air service.

The second principle governs research of public opinion. Before you carry out an activity in public relations you will have to learn what you can of public opinion in relation to your specific objectives. You will have to answer in terms of your objectives some of the questions I raised when I discussed the nature of public opinion, its alignments, its attitudes and its actions. One way of finding out is to engage outside public opinion analysts. Some universities, among them Columbia University, and Harvard University, are now undertaking this kind of activity for clients. But if you have no funds for this, you can scale your research to your economics. Books available in any good library will tell you how to make such studies. After you research you may want to redefine your original objective because the public may not yet be ready for your objective. If your

questions are well worked out, your research will disclose who is for your goals, who against, and who on the fence. You will know what the distribution of opinion is in terms of age, sex, socio-economic status, and so on. You will also know the latent attitudes and the factors that form public opinion on your issue and other relevant data.

You study this raw material of the research. I gather you work comparably in naval warfare. You study your intelligence to indicate your strategy, how you can employ your effectives—in this case, mind power, man power, mechanics, and money. You have many strategies you can use. Here are three basic strategies: *intensification*—you strengthen the belief of those who already believe; *conversion*—winning over people to your point of view; and *negation*—blanketing or counteracting the opposing viewpoint. Obviously, these elements of strategy can be used alone or in combination. You also keep in mind in your strategy whether you are going into a blitzkrieg, a war of attrition, or a rear-guard action. It is obvious your strategy within these broad categories varies with the need.

Your next step in engineering of consent is to define your themes. Your research indicated why people are for, against, passive or ignorant of your cause. This knowledge enables you to identify the themes for conversion, intensification, or negation. Your research may show that a majority of people want, or do not want to accept your idea or cause for a variety of reasons. You pick themes your research has found acceptable to the publics you are interested in. You present these themes to your publics in six different ways. You present factual evidence about the validity of your themes to appeal to people to be convinced or persuaded by factual evidence. When we wanted the farmers in the southland to use nitrates we planted one field in corn fertilized with nitrate and another without nitrates. One field had a big sign which said

it was fertilized with nitrates; the next where the corn was lower and of poor growth said this had no nitrates. That was conveying factual evidence of the effectiveness of nitrates.

You can present your themes by reason. You validate the theme with the reasons for it. You can present your themes with persuasion. You marshal your arguments in favor of your themes persuasively. The fourth is authority. You enlist authority in favor of your themes and the course of action you want the public to support. Authority may be the viewpoint of a dispassionate expert, or your authority backing the theme may be the leader of a group whose support you want. The fifth point is tradition. We think we are completely progressive, and yet we depend on a continuity from the past. George Washington's farewell address still has an influence on many Americans, acceptance by tradition. And last is emotion. Surround your themes with emotion and some people will accept it who were unresponsive.

The next category in the engineering of consent is organization. After you have finished your research, decided on your themes, you outline the organization necessary to carry out your activities. Public relations needs the co-operation of the entire organization. A public relations department can counsel and guide the organization. Effective public relations depends on integration and co-ordination of everyone's activities.

The last category is planning, timing, and tactics. We have concerned ourselves so far in our engineering of consent with objectives, research, strategy, themes, and organization. Now the planning and timing of tactics develop. They are based on the previous steps. An important element in tactics is overt acts. They should follow the themes and strategies decided on. They will penetrate to the public through media, the many ways of conveying ideas—

newspapers, books, other publications, billboards, and even sky-writing. Verbal impact will be made by lectures, meetings, conferences, and speeches over the radio and over TV, which combines the visual and the oral impact. You plan and time tactics with your available resources. Public relations activity is vital to anybody who isn't a hermit in a tower. Two good bibliographies issued in different years may intrigue your interest. The University of Minnesota Press publishes one; the University of Princeton Press the other. They are called *A Bibliography on Propaganda, Promotion, and Public Opinion*.

## BIOGRAPHIC SKETCH

Mr. Edward L. Bernays

Mr. Bernays created and named the profession of counsel on public relations and laid down its system of practices and ethics. A nephew of Sigmund Freud, Mr. Bernays pioneered in the application of the social sciences to the problems of public relationships.

Acknowledged as *U.S. Publicist No. 1*, he has had a diversified practice. In partnership with his wife (author of *A Wife Is Many Women*) he has advised newspapers, magazines, governments, foundations, corporations, financial institutions, professional trade associations, educational institutions, individuals, amongst others.

He has been adviser to Presidents and has represented the United States Government in various capacities. In World War I, he was associated with the U.S. Committee on Public Information here and at the Peace Conference in Paris.

Mr. Bernays is chairman of the National Committee for an Adequate Overseas U.S. Information Program.

He is the author of many magazine articles and books on public relations and the humanities, including *The Engineering of Consent*, *Public Relations*, *Take Your Place at the Peace Table*, *Speak Up for Democracy*, *Public Relations: a Growing Profession*, *Propaganda* and *Crystallizing Public Opinion*.

Mr. Bernays has been awarded the rank of Officer of Public Instruction (French) 1926, and the King Christian X Medal (Danish) 1946. He has received the Certificate of Commendation of the University of Florida School of Journalism, 1954; Bronze Medallion and Award from Southern Methodist University, 1954; Award of Appreciation from the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, 1955.

He is a graduate of Cornell University and serves on the boards of several social service organizations.