

History of Public Relations special issue: Introduction

INTRODUCTION

Time Marches on, and So Does the History of Public Relations

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This is the first, and hopefully not the last, special issue on the history of public relations in the *Journal of Public Relations Research*. It has been very over-subscribed in terms of submissions and a challenge to select six papers from so many entries. This *problem* is actually a sign of scholarly health with symptoms of a wide range of topics from numerous parts of the world.

For those who are new to this field of research and scholarship, it may be a surprise that the expansion of historical research into public relations has taken off in the past eight years. Although there had been sporadic publication of articles in journals and some important texts, notably by Hiebert (1966), Cutlip (1994, 1995), Ewen (1996), Marchand (1998), Tye (1998), Miller (1999) and Griese (2001), it was not a field that was thriving. As indicated by the nation of these authors, it appeared to be wholly based in the U.S. and lacked an international dimension. That was an erroneous view as scholars such as Michael Kunczik, Gunter Bentele and Peter Szyszka in Germany, Karl Nessmann in Austria and Jacquie L'Etang in the U.K. had published articles and books from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s but with recognition limited by language and exposure in the main public relations academic journals.

The expansion took place after a 'History of public relations' special issue in the *Journal of Communication Management* (2008, Vol. 12, No. 4) prompted the organisation of the annual International History of Public Relations Conference (IHPRC) at Bournemouth University in England from 2010 onwards. This specialist conference has been the platform on which historians of public relations and academic researchers reflecting on the historical influences upon theory and practice have presented their research. Around 170 papers have been presented by authors from more than 40 countries during the first five conferences. Some of the papers submitted to this special issue arose from IHPRC 2014 presentations. In addition to conference proceedings (available at <http://historyofpr.com>), there has been expansion of academic publishing in book form from leading publishers, such as Routledge and Palgrave Macmillan, and of journal articles.

The *discovery* stage in which national histories have been written, personalities and influencers identified, and practices explored have provided the bulk of scholarship. At the time of writing, a series of books on 'National Perspectives on the Development of Public Relations' covering 73 countries in all continents and regions other than North America is being published by Palgrave (Watson, 2014a, 2015). This includes countries of which little has been researched on the evolution of public relations (e.g. Bulgaria, Indonesia, Uganda, the nations of Central America) and those which are well explored (Germany, U.K.).

As this stage has continued, it has become evident that there is no single model of public relations and the concept of public relations is broadly interpreted with important cultural variations that operate alongside the internationalised practices of the agency networks and corporations. Research into archives, oral histories and documentary analysis has buttressed similar findings from studies into global practices of public relations (e.g. Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009).

However, the scholarship has moved on to more analytical and critical approaches (Watson, 2014b), with increasing emphasis on historiography. The emphasis, as expressed in major text books used around the world, on ‘Great Men’ such as Ivy L. Lee, Edward Bernays and Arthur W. Page and that public relations was invented in the U.S. is being challenged by research into formative influences on public relations (Lamme & Russell, 2010; Wakefield, 2013) and by non-corporatist perspectives (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Somerville & Purcell, 2011). The critical approach to history has followed on from McKie & Munshi (2007)’s argument that many public relations historical accounts “are unique and unchallenged, or under-challenged, and in need of pluralising with robust perspectives” (p. 119) and “align with a modernist perspective” (p. 120). The critical approach (L’Etang, 2008, 2014; Logan, 2014; McKie & Xifra 2014) has refreshed understanding of public relations by contextualizing it within social and organizational frames, and the pressures and influences that shape communication. Previously it had often been presented as a stand-alone practice with professional ambitions that existed outside organizational, social, political and economic contexts.

The six papers that follow in this special issue extend the historiographical debate (Jordi Xifra & Robert L. Heath), explore the role of public relations in the communications efforts of the French Resistance in World War II (Gareth Thompson), consider the emergence of public relations within the Franco dictatorship of mid-century Spain (Natalia Rodriguez-Salcedo), place Chinese public relations within the modernization of that country (Christine Yi Hui Huang), introduce Peitho, the Greek goddess of persuasion (Charles Marsh) and review the rejection by US religious communicators of “public relations” as a concept and operational term (Douglas Cannon). They are a rich tapestry of historical research that widen our understanding of public relations as being much more than the management of communications in a corporate mould.

To choose six from 28 submissions has been very difficult and, as guest editor, I am most grateful for the 60 or so reviewers who have given their time, knowledge and academic scrutiny to all the papers. They, and all the authors, have contributed the continuing expansion of the history of public relations.

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