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THE CHALLENGE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION

FRANK WINSTON WYLIE



PERHAPS NO FIELD of study created more controversy when it arrived on the campus than public relations, even though it is now a major career line for able graduates and a field of activity important to our complex industrial society. The purposes of this paper are to discuss the nature of public relations practice and suggest some measures of its achievements; explain and answer general criticisms of the field; and, in that context, discuss the challenges of public relations education.

Public relations, first taught at New York University in 1923 by Edward L. Bernays, is one of the most recent arrivals on the academic scene. As such, it is subject to all of the critical reviews of the older, more established disciplines and professions. This criticism of public relations has been exacerbated by several factors: the pervasive success of the upstart field, the wide-ranging nature of the territories that it has claimed as its turf, and the predictable growing pains that have attended its sudden ascendancy among the management-related specialties.

Inasmuch as there is confusion about the scope of activities included under the term public relations, please consider this common definition agreed upon in 1978 by representatives of thirty-three national public relations societies:

Public relations is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which will serve the organization's and the public's interest.¹

1. Dennis L. Wilcox, Philip Ault, and Warren K. Agee, *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 6.

Such a definition is, quite naturally, the way it *ought* to be, but it would be presumptuous or simplistic to suggest that this is how public relations is always practiced. History suggests that no specialized field has always been faithful to its formally announced purpose. I will discuss variations of that purpose in public relations and the problems that these various excursions cause; I will then suggest appropriate responses to such errant performance.

2. J. Paluszek, "Public Relations and PRSA, a Vision and a Plan" (Speech presented to the Public Relations Society of America Annual Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio, 14 November 1988).

Much of the criticism that public relations has received has been caused by the extravagance of its successes and the unique brashness of its claims. John Paluszek, 1989 president-elect of the Public Relations Society of America, described public relations as a "profession."² Public relations, however, is *not* a profession in any real sense, and such presumptuousness

invites criticism and erodes credibility. Public relations does have a reasonably well-defined body of knowledge, but it lacks a generally accepted course of graduate study, a well-defined code of ethics, and the state licensing processes that often mark traditional professions. It is hoped that time will decrease the ranks of the premature claimants and increase the number of people who spend their energies creating plans that serve both the organization and the public interest. Action is far more convincing than words, and, fortunately, a majority of PR practitioners are actively involved in some rather remarkable things.

THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

E. Bruce Harrison cited the following examples of typical public relations activities done in the public interest: helping reduce the incidence of drunk driving in Virginia via a massive information campaign; suggesting that parents needed housing near their seriously ill children—a suggestion that led to the establishment of the Ronald McDonald Houses; and aiding the American Cancer Society's unrelenting efforts to inform women about the dangers of breast cancer and about early detection methodology.³ These examples, of course, are just a few of the thousands of different programs that PR practitioners perform, *pro bono*, for the nonprofit sector yearly. My own advanced students create *pro bono* programs for about one hundred charities each year.

In their day-to-day tasks for employers or clients, practitioners are doing things that serve both their organizations' and the public's interests. Some people will suggest, as Milton Friedman has done, that "the business of business is business" and that the public interest is another concern. This attitude is typical of the myopic thinking that has lessened our stature as a nation. Any action that does not serve the public interest will, at best, only postpone and exacerbate an inevitable problem. U.S. institutions are allowed to prosper only when they appear to serve the public interest; one finds frequent examples of organizations whose activities have been sharply curtailed once they have fallen from public grace. Hospitals, once under the province of doctors, are now being managed by insurance companies and Medicare. Insurance companies, once considered as private enterprise, are controlled by state regulation. Indeed, in the 1988 election in California, voters supported a proposition requiring that insurance rates be reduced by 20 percent. The message is quite clear: serve the public interest or suffer.

The nonpublic interest actions of a variety of politicians have done much to sully the name of public relations. James Reston suggested that "the hucksters are getting out of hand."⁴ And he reminded us that Franklin Roosevelt was the master of managing the news and that "what was merely P.R. talent on the part of Roosevelt has become a Deaverish industry under Mr. Reagan." To this cacophony must be added the taped claims of Richard Nixon suggesting "that public relations people might have been able to solve the Watergate problem." Nixon gave our business a bad name.⁵ Marian Javits worked on the Iranian Airlines account, at Ruder and Finn, at the same time her husband sat on the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee.⁶ Later, amid controversy, she resigned. That situation did not add to the luster of the field.

3. E. B. Harrison, Letter to "Reader Forum," *Private Practice*, 28 November 1983.

4. J. Reston, "Washington," *New York Times*, 9 April 1986.

5. David Finn, *Advertising Age*, 11 June 1984.

6. *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 August 1979, 57.

Frank Getlein pointed out that H. Robert Haldeman and John Ehrlichman of Watergate infamy were “from the wonderful world of advertising rather than from public relations, and there is a difference.” He continued,

Had the President been in touch with even a routine, run of the mill, PR guy, he would have heard, as the first comment on the adventure: “Don’t do it. It won’t work.” Far from being the product of public relations, Watergate was actually the result of the total absence, in the Nixon administration, of any public relations concern beyond massaging the ego of the chief.⁷

7. F. Getlein, Editorial, *Evening Star*, 11 July 1973, A-18.

Michael Deaver stands as a public relations person convicted of perjury. Anthony Franco, a former president of the Public Relations Society of America, resigned following the signing of a consent decree for insider trading and the attendant publicity.

There is no discipline, however, that has not been similarly besmirched, as a review of any week’s papers and magazines will document. Because of its wide sphere of activity, public relations gets some credit but, generally, more blame for even the misdeeds of politicians. Perhaps only the profession of law could be likewise affected, but here licensing is in effect and offers some protection: one cannot legally claim to be a lawyer unless one is a lawyer.

It would be helpful, at this point, to provide a partial list of activities that now come under the umbrella of public relations: publicity; fund-raising; employee, government, and community relations; financial relations; stockholder relations; speech writing; publications editing; political, educational, association, and nonprofit agency public relations; consensus building for ballot initiatives and cause organizations; and employee and volunteer recruiting. The list could go on but the case for diversity is made. As this list illustrates, public relations becomes involved in the whole organization, and its function of communication is no less from the public to the organization than from the organization to the public. Such magnitude of interests, operations, and concerns inevitably casts the effective public relations person sometimes in the role of the protagonist, sometimes in the role of the critic of other management functions. As a result, this newer discipline has not always won support from older, more established management disciplines. Similarly, actions of chief executive officers (CEOs) taken in the public interest often bring blame on the public relations function. If criticism of public relations seems excessive, so is the menu of activities and concerns that it handles. Nevertheless, its batting average is quite good.

CRITICISMS OF THE FIELD

Within organizations, there is always competition for the budget dollar. There is just so much available, and if public relations gets more, as a new and deserving element generally does, it is at the expense of other areas. This allocation often generates a fair amount of criticism, which is particularly apparent now in the nonprofit sector. This domain shunned public relations until recently, when PR and marketing were embraced with great enthusiasm by boards and CEOs, if not by competing interests within the

agency. Once a new discipline receives increased shares of budget monies and operates on all turfs, it is inevitable that the chorus of criticism swells. It would be incorrect, however, to assume that innocence defuses all criticisms or that public relations is really responsible for all of the offenses with which it is charged. Somewhere, perhaps near the median, lies the truth.

As is true with most upstarts, public relations tends to be somewhat brash. Properly, it is proud of the great magnitude and variety of its achievements; and improperly, it may be too thin-skinned and overreactive to criticism. In many important ways, public relations has yet to practice for itself what it practices for its clients. Many people in public relations are still asking for respect rather than following the counsel of the late John Houseman: “. . . earn it.” Philip Lesly echoed that sentiment: “Earn respect. Be invaluable to employers or clients by adding to their intelligence, not by just doing their chores.”⁸ Leo Northart chastised public relations people for their “self flagellation ritual.”⁹

Another body of critical comment centers on the lack of knowledge of some public relations practitioners. Considering the broad spectrum of PR activities, one should expect criticisms here. Some public relations people are faulted for not understanding how the media work. Stanley Modic, editor of *Industry Week*, wrote that many practitioners send him material that is nothing more than junk mail because it does not address any of the interests of his publication.¹⁰ The complaint is not uncommon; and, generally, it results from practitioners’ laziness or from the assignment of mailing chores to people with underdeveloped skills. In either case, the fault lies with public relations, and steps should be taken to change it. Editors soon learn who writes of worthwhile ideas and who has yet to learn the difference between ad copy and news. Editors also learn which envelopes should be opened and which may be discarded immediately, unopened.

Rance Crain, publisher of *Advertising Age*, raised a more serious challenge: “Public relations people’s biggest challenge is not with the press. It’s dealing with the PR departments’ own management.”¹¹ Crain’s criticism is precise in some cases, because in a new discipline, and indeed in the old ones as well, there are people who do not adapt to change; they fall behind the present and are hopelessly outdated for the future. Such anachronistic thinking deserves no place in a modern world. Also, many public relations people do not take the time and exert the effort to understand comprehensively the business that they are representing. For simple publicity, this sometimes may not matter, but for public relations, it is a cardinal sin. A Gallup/*Wall Street Journal* survey in 1980 indicated that among the CEOs responding, “Fewer than one in six executives says he’s satisfied with the performance of public relations specialists.”¹² One might hope that the odds have improved since then; and downsizing has had certain remedial effects, at least on removing the inept. Surely, those who do not enjoy the confidence of the CEO are in no position to provide positive assistance. Some of my peers in PR will probably suggest that the *Wall Street Journal* is always anti-PR, a concept that I reject; I find that the *Journal* is eminently fair and plays its watchdog role with poise and acumen.

8. Personal conversation with P. Lesly, at the Public Relations Society of America Annual Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio, 14 November 1988.

9. L. Northart, *Public Relations Journal* (November 1979): 56.

10. S. Modic, *Industry Week*, 10 August 1987, 7.

11. R. Crain, *Advertising Age*, 12 November 1985.

12. *Wall Street Journal*, 2 December 1980.

If public relations is so valuable, then why is it the subject of so much criticism? Some of the commentary may be explained by the rapid expansion of PR from its origins in publicity to a host of other areas. Subsequently, some of the practitioners have not been able to improve their skills to keep pace with their ambitions. There is another, perhaps more valid, rationale. Public relations people have had great success, which suggests that they are qualified to solve problems in all areas. While that may seem odd, let me assure you that it is not. I can recall a great variety of assignments: handling race relations, supplying recommendations for responses to strikes or riots, making cars win races, helping create a minority dealer program, running a 25,000-square-foot exhibition, lobbying, writing speeches, presenting speeches, working with dealers, and reversing the unanimous vote of a city council. The litany of such duties has hardly begun. Managers expect results, and qualified managers know how to get them. CEOs lean heavily on the good PR people, which is why there is a legion of practitioners with the breadth of knowledge to step into almost any situation and make sound recommendations or execute a program to solve the problem. These are the students, the women and men, who never give up learning all they can learn. Perhaps this aspect is what differentiates the competent from the incompetent in any field.

The statement that no one really speaks for public relations is, to a great extent, true. There are about 150,000 people who call themselves public relations practitioners, including the professional athlete unable to come back from that last knee injury. There are two major public relations organizations in the United States: the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). Each has a membership of about 14,000, and each has its own accreditation program requiring written and oral examinations. Although accreditation is a step in the right direction, neither organization has promoted it effectively. In contrast, the Canadian Public Relations Society has made accreditation a requirement for certain jobs. In Canada, accreditation has concrete meaning; in the United States, it does not.

The PRSA, however, enacted bylaws in November 1988 that require each "accredited" member to re-earn accreditation every three years or she or he will lose it. Now if the organizations will just promote it with management, placement groups, and personnel departments, it will have merit. The designation for an accredited person in public relations (APR) is copyrighted, can be protected, and stands as a symbol of demonstrated skill in the field.

The last criticism of public relations to be discussed here is the serious underrepresentation of minorities in the field, a problem that some colleges and universities are beginning to address. Twenty years ago the Kerner Commission stated, "The journalistic profession has been shockingly backward in seeking out, hiring, training, and promoting Negroes."¹³ Sharon Murphy cited the lack of minority role models as one of the reasons for the minimal minority student representation in journalism schools.¹⁴ The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) includes affirmative action for students and faculty as one of the twelve standards by which programs seeking accreditation will be judged.¹⁵ This standard is excellent, but it affects only the approximately

13. *Minorities in the Newspaper Business* 4, no. 4 (1988): 6.

14. *Ibid.*, 7.

15. ACEJMC, *Accredited Journalism and Mass Communications Education, 1987-88* (Lawrence, Kans., 1987), 15.

thirty programs that are accredited; many of these are programs that least need the nudging.

PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION: STEPCHILD OF AN ORPHAN

Having laid bare the problems of the discipline raised by the more stridently perceptive critics, I proceed to a discussion of public relations education: its origins, its progress, and its present needs.

Journalism is an old art but a relatively new academic pursuit, one which is still more tolerated than admired by educational traditionalists. Many journalism faculty came to the academy from nonacademic origins: they worked in the field, originally on newspapers and magazines and later on radio, television, and cable. Generally, the most advanced degree in journalism was, and still is, an M.A. Those who aspired to teach (for reasons of retention, tenure, and promotion) were encouraged to seek their Ph.D.'s in other, respectably established academic fields. Inasmuch as the early practitioners of public relations had worked on newspapers and then moved to publicity and later to public relations, it seemed reasonable to place public relations courses under journalism. Thus, public relations became the stepchild of an orphan.

The orphan showed little real interest in this stepchild. Many journalism departments either did not teach PR or scheduled it as a night class taught by professionals serving as adjuncts, a process that brought currency to the classroom but little academic stature to the field. Some journalism departments continued to disdain public relations, but as it grew, PR classes and eventually programs developed in speech, business, and even English departments. This activity attracted little attention until, in some cases, the speech-PR department was suddenly the equal of journalism. The strident voice of full-time equivalent students (FTES) had spoken. Journalism departments decided that there were faculty allocations and budgets to be minded in PR, and they welcomed it for what it could bring. Public relations began to prevail in spite of inattention and attack. During the 1970s, the PR enrollments at several large public and private universities soared; in some schools its enrollments were larger than those of news editorial. The field could no longer be ignored. If it had been, it might have been better off.

The public relations curriculum was often selected by, and supportive of, news editorial. The FTES were generated and assigned: frequently students took a group of news editing courses and one or two PR courses: not an ideal education for a specialty that demands much general knowledge of a variety of fields. This is the way it was, and, in many places, the way it still is—PR the stepchild of the orphan journalism.

The locus of journalism for public relations education was reinforced when the ACEJMC was designated (by the Council on Post Secondary Education and the Department of Education) as the home for PR education. This came as a blow to many PR educators who claimed they could never prosper there. However, PR enrollments continued to increase, and relocation arguments carried little weight. If so many students were enrolling, all must be well, or so the argument went. The disgruntled PR edu-

16. T. Hunt and D. W. Thompson, *Journalism Educator* 43, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 49.

cators chose to fight the wrong battle. They spent more time worrying about where they were than about what they were doing and how they could marshal support inside and outside the university. Some of them devoted all their time to bemoaning the courses they could not offer rather than playing the game to get what was needed. Other PR educators, starting in the mid-1970s, worried that there were too many women in public relations classes and that the field was to become “a velvet ghetto.” Todd Hunt and David W. Thompson reported a 10 to 1 female majority among the membership of various chapters of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA).¹⁶ A more fruitful concern might have been whether the students were better, regardless of their sex. Thus, in many cases, the wrong battles were being waged, or PR educators were not using PR techniques to achieve accommodation, consensus, and progress.

Public relations practitioners should also be faulted. They complained about the preparation that PR students were getting but failed to do much of significance to help educators. Until last year, there was not a single endowed chair in public relations education. In all candor, some practitioners took little interest because no one asked them. Other practitioners spent energies (and some still do) decrying that public relations education “wasn’t in the business schools where it belonged.” Such Don Quixote battles were a patent waste of talent and effort. The significant issues are, and were, which schools do a good job and what practitioners can do to help make them better.

Unfortunately, some of these arguments are still attracting more attention and wasting more ergs than they should. There is ample evidence that administrators at colleges and universities understand the need for public relations education. If they did not, hundreds of institutions would not be offering PR courses and certificate programs. The University of California-Los Angeles, which abolished its journalism department, constantly touts its PR certificate program, taught entirely by part-timers. The claim that PR and journalism cannot work together is specious; there are too many successes to support that argument. So, as they do in golf, let us play it as it lies.

There are two major aspects to public relations education—that which is offered by journalism or communication departments, and that which is offered by other departments, most particularly, the liberal arts and sciences. The ACEJMC provides some healthy, if sometimes frustrating, guidelines; for example, at least three-quarters of the students’ courses must be outside journalism or communication. Three cheers! We are not running trade schools but trying to provide a college education that has some scope. The wisdom is in the recognition that a college education is meant to stimulate intellectual curiosity and to introduce students to systematic ways of thinking and analyzing. Can a program offer enough public relations courses to adequately prepare students and still meet the ACEJMC requirements? The answer is affirmative: it can be done, though not easily. Let us remember, however, that only a few programs are affected by these requirements. It seems no accident that these programs are also generally considered to be the best programs.

Where, then, are the problems? The greatest difficulty, under ACEJMC standards, comes with the students who arrive from junior or community

colleges. The courses they took as first- or second-year students, before they transferred or thought about public relations, can sometimes restrict what they may take at the university. These courses can prevent some students from taking a PR major and others from taking a complementary minor in marketing or business. This problem begs for more attention and more effective resolution.

Because public relations involves many of the disciplines, it is necessary to translate the term “interdisciplinary” into a greater reality and to incorporate more contributions from other disciplines, especially from the business fields and social sciences. If there is fault in some programs, it may be found in faculty who concentrate their interest only on journalism-PR courses and let students wander casually through the 100-level courses of anything or everything. This occasionally occurs because faculty shun the every-semester advising duty or relegate that duty to graduate students. Advising is far too important to be ignored or relegated.

If PR graduates are to function, they must have a good knowledge of, and ability to use, the English language. Marketing is an essential, as is knowledge of history, government, economics, research methodology, ethics, humanities, sociology, psychology, social geography, arts, natural sciences, and anthropology. Foreign language is a decided plus; likewise, knowledge of mathematics, accounting, and management is important. If the four-year schedule is planned carefully, all of these are possible, and one can still meet ACEJMC standards.

What then should be included in the journalism-PR curriculum? I suggest the following as an example: introduction to mass communication, journalism writing and reporting, introduction to public relations, internal communication, external communication, PR publications, case studies (problem solving and program execution), agency public relations, and two internships (one for credit). All of these fit within the ACEJMC guidelines; though, for some reason, this proposed curriculum is more than most programs offer in PR. In fact, the PRSA is currently, if tentatively, trying to introduce a requirement of five PR courses for a school to qualify for a PRSSA chapter.¹⁷ And, in addition to what is offered, one must be concerned with how it is offered. In our program at California State University, Long Beach, all students research and write papers at least once each week; present their work in class; spend time with and interview many practitioners; create programs to help charities; and fail any assignment that is late. It is demanding, but then so is the life they are about to enter. They learn how to integrate the knowledge they acquire from all of their courses to help analyze and solve problems. They think well and fast; they are smart; and they work hard. They come to know the necessity of combining talent, discipline, and commitment.

Do they learn all they should? Of course not. Were it not for the imperatives of FTES, one could make a sound case for a liberal arts major and a business minor at the undergraduate level, leaving most of the public relations courses to a graduate program. But, PR professors cannot wave a wand and change the educational world. For the most part, then, the preliminary education for public relations will continue to be taught at the undergraduate level, where, most fortunately, there is a variety of excellent models from which to choose.

17. *PR Division Newsletter* (Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communications) (Fall 1988): 1.

What are the other concerns affecting public relations education? One, which applies to PR and journalism faculty rather equally, is the university requirement of a Ph.D. for most tenure-track or tenure positions. Couple that with the admitted need for affirmative action and you find searches that focus solely on finding a black, female Ph.D. Yet, the number of black graduate students, especially doctoral students, continues to decline. We find a similar pattern among Hispanic students, and the number of Asian and American Indian students in journalism-PR education is infinitesimal. It may be time to stop looking and start developing our own fully representative, ethnically diverse student body, a process that would demand at least ten years of long-range planning and execution. However, it may be the only answer to the search for the minority Ph.D.

A balance between current experience and academic training must also be considered. A small percentage of faculty remain active in the practice of public relations or journalism. Merely reading the journals is not an adequate way of remaining current, and therefore relevant. The ACEJMC suggested the need for balance but was not specific: "Faculties should be comprised primarily of full-time personnel. . . . full-time faculty must have primary responsibility for teaching, research and service."¹⁸ What incentives can be created to encourage full-time faculty to take work sabbaticals, or to encourage professionals to take advanced degrees? We have yet to ascertain what will be effective, what it will cost, and who will fund it. But clearly, we must do more than dream of what should be.

We must also remember that the United States does not live in isolation. Indeed, it must remain a relevant participant in the world community and marketplace. Page Smith addressed the subject thoughtfully:

Any new view of education must, in its essence, be international. It should not be filled with pious observations about universal brotherhood (nor need it or should it be hostile to one's own national tradition): it should take for granted that we are all part of an international community in the process of becoming, and everything should be taught from that perspective.¹⁹

18. ACEJMC, *Accredited Journalism*, II.

19. P. Smith, *Dissenting Opinions* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 154.

IN SUMMARY, if public relations education is to prosper as it should, administrators and educators must

- think and plan in interdisciplinary concepts;
- develop curricula that address the international environment in which we live, integrating the technology so it can serve new purposes and facilitate old activities;
- anticipate future faculty needs and develop talent to meet those needs;
- make the personal commitment to recruit, educate, and graduate minority students;
- be concerned with the total education of the student, not just the journalism-PR curriculum;
- increase the emphasis on ethics;
- involve practitioners more meaningfully; and
- move thoughtfully toward an emphasis on graduate education for public relations. To do less is to fail. ♦

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