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Public relations

Rise of the image men

PR Man has conquered the world. He still isn't satisfied

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AS THEY prepared to face their second big strike in four years, America's coal-mining bosses knew they had to do something about the newspapers. It was 1906—a time of rising resentment against robber-baron capitalism and the heyday of muckraking "yellow journalism". During the previous strike the trade unions had fostered good relations with newspapermen and won themselves a sympathetic press. To help put their side of the story, the mining bosses turned to a former journalist, Ivy Lee.

It was already fairly common for big companies and public figures to employ publicists and press agents to represent them and rebut criticism. But these men did not conduct extended campaigns to influence public opinion. And many prominent folk engaged with the mass media as little as possible. As Stuart Ewen notes in "PR! A Social History of Spin", the standard businessman's attitude towards the public was one of "hardened arrogance". Lee was to pioneer new methods—and, in the process, create a new industry.

Lee observed that the rise of national newspaper chains and syndicated journalism in America since the 1880s, combined with the extension of the franchise, had profoundly changed society. Now, for the first time, there was something that could accurately be called "public opinion", a shared consciousness and conversation across the country—and it was to be feared. Lee noted how the emerging mass media were acting as the conduit for the anti-capitalist message of Progressivism, the liberalising reform movement that peaked in

America in the early 20th century. He realised not only that it was essential for businesses to counter this message, but that the same conduit could be used to spread pro-business sentiment.

His idea, blindingly obvious now but a novelty then, was to send newsdesks a stream of statements putting the mining bosses' case and rebutting allegations against them. These, as well as the statements he put out the same year on behalf of a railway following a train crash, are now sometimes described (with a bit of spin) as the first press releases. The immediate result was perhaps the earliest recorded whinges from journalists about being bombarded with tendentious bumf.

Lee's response to such complaints was a bombastic "Declaration of Principles". He snorted that "This is not an advertising agency...our plan is frankly, and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about." No doubt the hacks scoffed at his pomposity. Lee's tactics nonetheless worked: the mining bosses' side of the story was given a fairer hearing henceforth. The public-relations consultant had been born.

Of course, spin and image-making have been around for as long as history has been recorded. The earliest historians were often the PR men for the winners of battles and dynastic squabbles. In 18th-century London, the political spin-doctor was already at work, in the form of Georgiana Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire, who conducted a ruthless publicity campaign on behalf of the Whig leader, Charles James Fox, in between posing for Gainsborough and Reynolds.

But only since the early 20th century, and Lee's campaigns for the coal and rail bosses, has there been a recognisable PR industry dedicated to shaping the representation of clients in the media. That industry has since grown to enormous (indeed, perhaps excessive) size and global reach. Ever since Lee's first spats with cynical hacks, public-relations officers have been locked in an antagonistic, symbiotic relationship with journalists, with mutual contempt tempered by mutual dependency. They have also fought for influence within big corporations against their great rivals in the marketing and advertising departments. Yet, after a century of spinning, PR Man remains uncertain of his proper role. Is he a master manipulator? Is he the devil's advocate (as long as Satan pays his fees)? Or is he a benign bridge-builder between the corporate world and the public?

The dark arts

Despite representing big businesses, Lee at first bought in to two of Progressivism's main ideas: that the excesses of capitalism must be curbed; and that ordinary people were rational and responded best to facts and figures. He presented an "honest broker" vision of public relations that, to this day, is the one that most of the industry's leaders reflexively proffer. As Lee put it, PR is a "two-way street". He put forward sincere, factually based explanations on behalf of his clients, listened attentively to the public's response, then conveyed it back to his masters, helping them to understand better how to meet people's expectations.

This principled version of PR did not long withstand pressure from clients to take a more forceful stance. In 1914 perhaps the most unpopular capitalist barons of all, the Rockefellers, were facing a storm of popular anger over a massacre of striking miners and their families by the paid thugs of a Rockefeller mining company in Ludlow, Colorado. Lee was hired on the strength of his performance in the previous decade's mining strike. But instead of delivering honest truths, as he had promised in his "declaration", he spread egregious lies about the strikers and the cause of their deaths. One of his press releases accused Mother Jones, an elderly

union organiser, of being a prostitute and brothel-keeper.

Testifying to a congressional inquiry afterwards, Lee was startlingly honest about his dishonesty. “What is a fact?” he asked. “The effort to state an absolute fact is simply an attempt to give you my interpretation of the facts.” In other words, it was perfectly OK to bamboozle the public with plausible-sounding factoids. Verisimilitude mattered more than veracity. His testimony earned Ivy Lee the nickname “Poison Ivy”. He had committed what is still seen as a grave error for a PR man: becoming the story.

Freudian analysis

Even when Lee was claiming to be an honest broker there were some who doubted that the public responded best to rational argument. The rise of radicalism in the years preceding the Russian revolution worried elites everywhere. And there was growing interest in what the emerging field of psychology had to say about the irrationality of the human mind, and in particular that of the masses. Among the curious was Edward Bernays, a nephew of Sigmund Freud and the other main contender for the title of PR’s founding father. He turned others’ theoretical musings on ordinary people’s openness to images and emotional appeals into a series of handbooks explaining how to manipulate the public mind in pursuit of corporate or political goals.

Like Lee, Bernays had started out as a journalist, editing medical magazines. But he discovered the power of persuasion when, in 1913, he promoted a play about the spread of syphilis in a family, breaking a taboo against mentioning sexual diseases. The success of his efforts persuaded him to become a publicist, representing some of the great performers of the day, from Vaslav Nijinsky to Enrico Caruso.

Bernays’s greatest opportunity came with the outbreak of the first world war. President Woodrow Wilson realised the government needed to bring on board the many doubters who saw it as a capitalists’ war that their country should shun. Bernays and other leading PR men were recruited to a new Committee on Public Information (CPI), a vast propaganda operation. They were to put into practice one of Bernays’s main findings from the studies of mass psychology by Uncle Sigmund and others: that the public’s first impulse is usually to follow a trusted leader rather than consider the facts for itself.

In small towns across the country the CPI recruited bank managers and other local authority-figures as “four-minute men”. They gave brief, supposedly impromptu, speeches in cinemas and other public places. Many made the bogus claims that antiwar sentiment was being fomented by German agents, and that America risked being overrun by Prussians.

So successful was the CPI in shaping public opinion that it encouraged the early PR men, Bernays especially, to puff themselves up to new heights of grandeur. No longer would they be mere lackeys of the robber barons; they were now the Great Manipulators, shapers of public opinion for the public’s own good. Bernays went so far as to proclaim that, since the public was so irrational, “The conscious and intelligent manipulation

of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society." The alternative to manipulation, he argued, was chaos. Illustrating the extent of his, and the PR business's, exuberance at this time, one of Bernays's manuals boasted: "When Napoleon said, 'Circumstance? I make circumstance,' he expressed very nearly the spirit of the public relations counsel's work."

Unlike Napoleon the PR industry has never known retreat. It has spent the past century advancing, from its origins in America and Britain, across the globe and into all areas of corporate and public life. In "A Century of Spin", another history of the industry, David Miller and William Dinan note how PR conquered China in the 1980s, in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's reforms. In 1984 the first state firm set up an internal PR department, followed a year later by the country's first PR agency, a joint venture between Burson-Marsteller (a big American firm) and the Xinhua news agency. These days PR enjoys as heady a growth rate as any other industry in China.

Edward Bernays maintained that the alternative to manipulation was chaos

All sorts of outfits have discovered the power of persuasion. Charities, trade unions, protest groups and other anti-corporate organisations create stunts and "facts" as powerful, and sometimes as dubious, as those staged by Bernays's minions. A masterful recent example is a Greenpeace video in which an office worker opens a KitKat and finds an orangutan's finger inside—the intention being to press Nestlé, the chocolate bar's maker, to stop buying palm oil from places where the ape's native forests are being cut down. Such anti-corporate PR often goes curiously unnoticed by historians of the industry, but it is at least as manipulative as what companies get up to.

Indeed, a revolving door has opened between the PR operations of companies and their critics. In 1997 Greenpeace, seeking a new communications chief, turned to Jonathan Wootliff, formerly of two of America's biggest providers of corporate PR advice, Hill & Knowlton and Fleishman-Hillard. And where is Mr Wootliff nowadays? Back on the corporate side. He works for Reputation Partners, advising big firms (from BP to an Indonesian pulp firm) how to build "productive relationships" with NGOs and activists. The public-relations men recognise that PR is PR, whichever side it is conducted for.

Washes whiter than white

Barry Downard

Since the 1960s, when both sides in the brutal secessionist war in Nigeria's Biafra region hired foreign PR men to try to get the world on their side, the agencies have found a growing sideline in what their critics call

"reputation laundering". Hardly any regime has been too nasty to be represented, from Argentina's bloody military regime to Suharto's brutal kleptocracy in Indonesia. Justifying their image-making on behalf of such unappealing clients, PR men have developed another version of what their industry is for—an alternative to the well-established "honest broker" and "great manipulator" models—in which they portray themselves as defence lawyers in the court of public opinion. By analogy with the criminal courts, where even murderers are entitled to a defence, they argue that they are simply serving justice.

For example, in August, when the *Guardian* wrote about his company's image-making for the government of Sri Lanka and others with poor human-rights records, Tim Bell, one of British PR's leading figures (and a former image-maker to Margaret Thatcher) responded: "I am not an international ethics body. We do communications work. If people want to communicate their argument we take the view that they are allowed to do so." Lord Bell nonetheless says he would not force his staff to work for a client they found unpalatable. Some were recently excused from working on a brief to represent the Norwegian government in calling for a resumption of whaling, for example.

Although it has been debating the issue for decades, the PR industry is no closer to agreeing where the limits of such advocacy should lie, says Anne Gregory, professor of public relations at Leeds Metropolitan University in England. Its professional bodies have codes of practice that ban outright lying on clients' behalf. But there are so many agencies fighting for business that such rules are often honoured in the breach. The industry "goes round and round" the same ethical issues "like wheels spinning in the mud", she laments.

What people in the industry are certain about, and have been since the days of Lee and Bernays, is their burning desire to be more than just press-release peddlers and excuse-makers. PR folk want to be at the strategic heart of organisations, helping to make big decisions. Some cite firms such as IBM and Diageo (a drinks giant) where PR men have won seats at the executive top table. Such optimists—the industry is full of them, of course—now spy a rare opportunity to steal a march on the Mad Men of advertising and the flipchart-wielders of marketing. In the chaotic online world of social networking, they argue, their talents are much more relevant than their rivals'.

Here's their spiel: the mainstream media—the traditional gatekeepers of news and the bane of the PR man's life—are becoming less important. So is the worth of the advertising slots they sell, and therefore so are the sort of paid-for, hard-sell campaigns that the ad men and marketers deal in. Meanwhile social networking, with its cacophony of bloggers, Facebookers and tweeters, is becoming more influential. It is also confusing and hard to control. The public is becoming deafened and confused by a barrage of contradictory messages. Bernays's maxim about the public needing trusted "influencers" to tell them what to buy and think is therefore becoming truer than ever.

> Anyone with a laptop can quickly become a company's most trenchant critic

It is true that anyone with a laptop or smartphone can go online and quickly become a company's most trenchant and visible critic. Look at the attention (and the near-200,000 followers) grabbed by BPGlobalPR, a Twitter feed set up to attack BP over the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. In this world, PR firms expect that their clients will need more help in mopping up publicity slicks and, ideally, in preventing image blowouts before they occur. Ray Kotcher, the boss of Ketchum, one of America's biggest agencies, predicts there will be "more demand for reputation-defending than ever". As a result, PR is bound to become more vital, he reckons.

It is not difficult to stick pins in the PR men's inflated hopes of being the lords of online chaos. For a start, ad

men can also distribute their hard-sell branding campaigns on social networks. Nike shows its television ads—the same ones it pays to have broadcast—on its Facebook page, to which over 3m people have signed up as "likers". Ms Gregory has seen few cases where PR firms have created true social-media-only campaigns: all that is happening is that social-media elements are being added to traditional marketing plans.

As for reaching those new social media "influencers", most of these still get their basic information from old-fashioned news providers, as do most powerful and influential people. Lord Bell is sceptical, too, pointing out that PR men have talked of rising to the top of big firms for years.

But even if the PR men are in danger of believing their own spin about the opportunities the online world will bring, at least they are showing signs of adapting to it and finding ways to use technological change to further their business. They may not achieve the power and glory they have ached for since the industry's early days. But it is clear that another century of spin, perhaps greater than the one gone by, is in prospect.

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