Ethical Thought in Public Relations History: Seeking a Relevant Perspective

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☐ *A serious retardant to development of a specifically public relations (PR) ethical philosophy is the tendency to retain a commitment uniquely journalistic—objectivity. Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays offered two ethical options or imperatives, based on objectivity or on advocacy. Public relations must accept a commitment to the ethics of persuasion in order to reduce a crippling inferiority complex and advance understanding of the profession by its practitioners as well as the public*

Public relations progressed from the unethical ballyhoo of press agents with early obeisance by publicists to acceptance of the news values of accuracy, honesty, and "truth"—in a word, objectivity (Hiebert, 1966; Raucher, 1968). However, the profession as a whole has yet to declare its independence from that journalistic ethic, which is dysfunctional to advocacy (Fox, 1980).

Seeking a Relevant Perspective for PR

In search of a more relevant perspective, encouraging rather than stunting growth, this review of ethical thought in public relations history attempts to answer several questions: What is the effect on public relations practice and practitioners of a dominant yet dysfunctional

perspective? How did journalistic objectivity become, inappropriately, the ethical standard by which public relations is measured? Is there an alternative ethical perspective more suited to advocacy and equally rooted in the profession's past?

Historical evidence suggests that dominance of journalists' paternalistic perspective on public relations accounts for practitioners' slow and reluctant weaning from the ethic of their putative parent profession. Journalism education increasingly encompassed public relations coursework due to similarity in basic skills for both careers (Harrel, 1952). Accounts of origins of public relations compound misconceptions by equating the contributions of early publicists such as Ivy Lee, who proclaimed allegiance to objectivity, with those of later practitioners who openly avowed advocacy (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985). Pioneering practitioner Edward L. Bernays asserted a perspective on persuasion that offers more promise for ethical progress (Olasky, 1984).

The paternalism of the journalistic perspective on public relations is evident throughout literature on mass communications ethics, reflecting 60 years of public relations' growing pains. In its infancy, public relations was the "illegitimate child of publicity family, born of education as a mother and begotten of special interest as a father" in the "red light district of human relations" (Siebert, 1935, p. 28, and Schudson, 1978, p. 137, respectively). Twenty years ago, the profession was still in puberty because, as Wales (1965) said, "public relations writers seem as self-conscious about their virtue [ethics] as a teenager is about social poise." The adolescent struggle of either was "distressing to watch" (p. 696).

By 1950, public relations achieved traditional measures of professional maturity with specialized coursework, a national association, and an ethics code (Schoch, 1984). Despite repeated claims of progress, application of even the term *professional* to public relations is argued (Agee, 1965; Chase, 1966; Fitzgerald, 1946; Goldman, 1948; Wright, 1976). Few scholars bravely linked the terms *ethics* and *public relations*, and writings on the subject ranged from scarce to virtually nonexistent (Wright, 1982). Today,

research on public relations ethics focuses on current practice and rarely seeks historical evidence of an ethical past.

History of Ethical Ambivalence

The effect of many decades of misconceptions is ethical ambivalence in public relations practice and education. Students planning public relations careers are twice as likely as students in other fields to see unethical behavior as a part of practitioners' primary tasks. They expect to be press agents rather than clients' counselors (Gitter, 1981). The predominant ideal still taught to aspiring journalists and practitioners alike is objectivity, according to a content analysis of journalism texts (Christians, 1977). According to an analysis of six public relations textbooks, there is a lack of balance with "a very well-rounded, complete view of issues related to honesty in communication" (Culbertson, 1983, p. 70).

Public relations courses could at least counter the overwhelming hostility toward practitioners, and historical inaccuracies about the profession, found in a content analysis of 12 introductory mass communication textbooks. Due to this negative introduction inculcated in aspirants to all communication careers, practitioners "must resign themselves to another generation which views public relations as less ethical, less professional—but better paying—than journalism" (Cline, 1982, p. 71).

Journalists crossing over to public relations careers experience the "role strain" of "marginality" (Swartz, 1983). Journalism is the career path of more than half of practitioners, earning them the greater professional status, which encourages ethical autonomy. However, they are less likely to exercise it than are practitioners who never held journalism jobs (Wright, 1976). All practitioners "have an inferiority complex. They're frustrated by the narrow-minded journalist who still thinks public relations only includes publicity work" (Wright, 1979, p. 26). The "former newspaperman . . . may fall flat on his typeface when he becomes a PR executive for a corporation. His job is no longer objective reporting,

letting the chips fall where they may. Now he gives advice about how the public will react to the news the corporation makes" (Henry, 1984, p. 269).

In a Situational Trap

The resultant underlying principle of public relations, according to a survey of practitioners, is *subjectivism* or *individual relativism*—colloquially, it is called "situational ethics." "Practitioners are trapped in a kind of tug-of-war that produces considerable moral-ethical stress, stress heightened by the absence of specific guidelines" (Ryan & Martinson, 1984, p. 33).

Journalists' hostility is more than occupational mythology, whereas practitioners persist in perception of a "shared culture" with media people. Qualitative surveys of reporters and editors show that the journalistic perspective on public relations is pervasive (Goodwin, 1983; Hulteng, 1976; Meyer, 1983; Mills, 1983; Sewell, 1981; Swain, 1978). Given a list of 16 professions, journalists ranked the relative status of public relations last and their profession first. Practitioners ranked themselves fourth, and journalists a step higher. Practitioners held the same "news values" as did journalists, although journalists expected otherwise. Practitioners, who provide more than half of local news daily, perceive themselves as partners with the press (Aronoff, 1975, 1976; Brown, 1976). By contrast, journalists and their nonpractitioner sources work in a "shared culture" of mutual respect, exchanging information and publicity (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1981; Drechsel, 1983; Dunwoody, 1983).

The shared culture analogy, encouraging practitioners' inheritance of journalism education and ethics, was established early in historical accounts of public relations. One early chronicler, Eric Goldman (1948), suggested that a "cultural lag" delayed acceptance of practitioners as professionals. He attributed the lag to practitioners' "antecedents in the unsavory press agent" and to their new role as agents of change, inevitably incurring resistance. However wellintentioned, his apologia does not just

defer acceptance but denies it by condemning public relations for its inescapable past and inherent purpose.

Historians generally acknowledge two fathers of modern public relations, first Ivy Lee and then Edward L. Bernays. This unusual joint paternity, decades apart, is ascribed in Goldman's representative scenario of public relations history. He correctly credited Lee with advancing at the turn of the century from the first stage, "public-be-fooled" press agentry, to the next stage, "public-be-informed" publicity. Goldman dated his third stage of the profession to publication in 1923 of Bernays' *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, inaugurating the "public-be-understood" era (Goldman, 1948).

The evolutionary analysis of public relations development does a disservice in minimizing the break from Lee's traditional 19th-century journalism to Bernays' revolutionary proclamation for 20th-century practice. A superficial similarity in their skills masked a polarity of purpose between information and persuasion (Olasky, 1984). Called to emulate both Lee and Bernays, practitioners are caught in an ethical quandary.

Ethics Gap Not Acknowledged or Understood

Practitioners can only be outcasts in a journalistic culture. More than a generation gap between Lee and Bernays, more than a cultural lag in acceptance, there is a cultural chasm between journalism and public relations with implications for ethical practice neither fully acknowledged nor understood. Research and commentary on ethics indicates that "foreigners" are automatically viewed as less ethical. Abiding by one set of standards, they are measured by another, and found wanting (Bok, 1977; Hegarty & Sims, 1978).

The ruling ethic of the journalistic culture, objectivity is a 19th-century "lore, tradition, almost a tribal memory" (Meyer, 1983, p. 42). Journalists seized on objectivity in the 1880s in rejection of press partisanship prevalent at the time (Susman, 1979). Widely adopting objectivity in the 1920s, when concern for professional status soared, journalists embraced "conventions . . . developed to report an-

other century and another society" and confused practice with principle, methodology with morality (Carey, 1969, p. 35).

The problem with objectivity as an ethic is that its "right to ignore implications" exempts journalists from responsibility for the effect of news (Gans, 1980). Despite early recognition by journalists of its moral shortcomings, objectivity by the 1930s was an "articulate professional value" of relativism, forthrightly asserted but awkwardly defended (Saalberg, 1973). The irony of journalists' "blind adherence" to objectivity is that it "allowed the emergence and phenomenal expansion" of public relations as a mechanism of institutional self-defense (Schudson, 1978, pp. 157, 187).

Journalistic Reliance on Sources

Objectivity's practical pitfall, which journalists were slower to see, was that freedom from reliance on advertising or political sources left journalists still dependent on news sources. Publicists and practitioners became sources skilled at using the press, rather than abusing it as did press agents and propagandists. The first to turn objectivity to his corporate clients' advantage was, logically, an ex-newspaperman: turn-of-the-century publicist Ivy Lee.

Objectivity was the ethic preached, if not always practiced, by Lee. Journalists were bewildered by Lee's ability to deny that persuasion was his purpose but still get publicity, and even accurately predict its news placement. Lee achieved ethical progress with his "Declaration of Principles," denouncing the secrecy of press agentry and promising to "work in the open" with the press (Hiebert, 1966). Yet Lee was an unlikely pioneer and holds too paternal a role in public relations history. He lacked vision, expecting his "art" to expire with him rather than become a field requiring ethical codification.

Bernays brought a new perspective to public relations in his unabashed proclamation of persuasive purpose. The ideas espoused in *Crystallizing Public Opinion* were radical, according to a recent argument against an evolutionary view of public relations history (Olasky, 1984). Bernays

echoed Lee's call to deal openly with the press—and openly admitted, too, his advocacy. Bernays envisioned the social role of practitioners as agents of change—as counselors—rather than as agents of the press. He devoted a section of his first book to Ethical Relations (1923), foresaw the field's growth and issued the first call for specialized, nonjournalistic training. Bernays called for an ethics code in his next book, *Propaganda* (1928), a title typifying his bold defense of the profession.

Lee's self-respect and Bernays' self-confidence perplexed journalists, who equated their practices One mourned the passing of the press agent's baggy-pants buffoonery in profiles of Lee and Bernays Lee "told them no funny stories and offered them no drinks" but still got publicity from reporters he treated like "errand-boys" (Pringle, 1926) Bernays visited newsrooms only rarely but still reached the public (Pringle, 1930). Lee and Bernays refused to be journalists' court jesters. They compared themselves, instead, to lawyers in the "court of public opinion" (Bernays, 1923, 1928; Hiebert, 1966).

Journalists equated both Lee's and Bernays' approaches with intervening wartime propaganda Bernays, a prewar press agent, enlisted in the World War I Committee on Public Information (CPI) headed by ex-newspaperman George Creel. Public relations historians place the CPI in the tradition of publicity—providing information—and downplaying propaganda's purpose of manipulation (Goldman, 1948). The CPI was more complex; Creel believed in a public of rational individuals able to shape their own opinions from factual evidence, whereas others on the CPI endorsed, instead, the idea of an irrational public swayed by appeals to mass emotions Methods used presaged the postwar scope of public relations activities, using channels beyond the press (Vaughn, 1980, 1983).

Public Relations Confused With Propaganda

Postwar understanding of the emerging profession was prejudiced by confusing publicity and public relations with propaganda and press agentry's connotations of unethical practice. Practitioners' critics, Bernays wrote,

"felt that what we did was different from press agentry but . . . were not clear as to why" (Bernays, 1965, p. 786). It was "the apparent dishonesty of Bernays' approach that rankled" those who, like *Editor & Publisher*, belittled his "new and higher ethics" (Olasky, 1984). This "muddled thinking," an observer wrote, required that a distinction be made between methods and motives. "Veiled propaganda," like the secrecy of press agentry, used many of the methods of publicists and practitioners—and, therefore, of journalists—but the hidden motives of propagandists differed from admitted persuasive aims (Siebert, 1935). Open advocacy was dishonest only in comparison with objectivity.

Motives of the press, particularly those of the writer of "The Menace to Journalism" in the *North American Review* in 1921, were questioned by a publicist who suggested in one of the earliest counterattacks that he was only a "menace to its revenues." The "new profession" was "forced into existence by the failure of the press in many important particulars to live up to its highest ideals" of objectivity (Brownell, 1922). A later historian of public relations in the corporate sector also attributed journalists' resentment of early practitioners to their ability to get "free space" instead of paying for it (Raucher, 1968). Sniping at "spacegrabbers" was a side issue deflecting discussion of ethical concerns. It explains publishers' attitudes, but oversimplifies the reaction of journalists who were proud of their new-found professionalism. They could not grant dignity to the new profession without admitting the inadequacy of their own imperfect ethic.

Usurpation of Press Power

Journalistic hostility may have been motivated not by practitioners' ability to bypass advertising offices but by their audacity in bypassing the newsroom. Lack of deference to the power of the press—even usurpation of it—as the source of information to the public signalled another departure from the journalistic perspective. Bernays (1928) explained as early as the 1920s that the scope of public relations activities relegated media contact to a

minor role. Publicity was not the point at which the practitioner starts his activities, as "many persons still believe" but "the stage at which he actually ends them." The diversity of public relations functions, he wrote then and almost four decades later, called for training in business, sociology, psychology. Never a newspaperman, Bernays did not recommend journalism training (Bernays, 1928, 1965).

However, journalism preparation became predominant in education for public relations, reinforcing misconceptions of practitioners' ethical responsibilities and range of activities. Clear evidence of the reasons behind this educational philosophy is lacking, but can be speculated upon. Bernays, who taught the first public relations course in a business school in 1923, emphasized principle over profit with personal accountability for professional conduct (Bernays, 1923, 1965). The new business ethic of social responsibility, answering muckrakers, recognized the role of business in society only so far as accepting institutional responsibility for corporate conduct (Heald, 1961; Lerbinger, 1975; Prout, 1978; Reeves & Ferguson-DeThorne, 1980).

Journalism schools, a measure of professionalism, multiplied in the 1920s (Christians, 1977). Public relations courses contributed to enrollments, although in the 1930s growth in numbers of public relations practitioners was slower due to what Bernays would recall as the "economic debacle which put business in the doghouse" (Bernays, 1965). Echoing Bernays' recommendations for public relations education and ethics, a leading scholar called in 1940 for a more enlightened application of the social responsibility concept with concern for personal as well as corporate behavior. In an article still used in texts two decades later, he asked for "an adequate understanding" of sociology, political science, economics, and other "cultural backgrounds" for public relations functions (Childs, 1940).

Best Background for Public Relations

Still, journalism was the best "cultural background" for public relations, a teacher told practitioners prospering in

the postwar boom. The number of colleges and universities offering public relations courses, 21 in 1945, quadrupled from 1946 to 1948 and totaled 142 in 1951. Half of these institutions housed public relations in education departments, and well over one third in journalism departments. Only 1 course in 10 was in a business curriculum, practitioners were told (Harrel, 1952). He cited unnamed "survey after survey" in support although practitioners surveyed in 1949 said journalism skills were secondary and ranked journalism fourth among recommended academic subjects (Krimel, 1949).

Although public relations courses increasingly came under journalism's tutelage in the 1950s, the first edition of Cutlip and Center's (1952) landmark textbook for the profession listed nearly two dozen "examples" of its ever-expanding activities. They gave media relations 2 of 28 chapters, first as a means of reaching the public and then as one of many publics at which a practitioner aimed. Cutlip and Center (1952) also included the ethics code adopted in 1950 by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA).

Specialized training, an ethics code, and the national PRSA, merged in 1948 from several groups dating back to 1915, all suggested the ethical progress made by practitioners by midcentury. Public relations had achieved hallmarks of professionalism equivalent to those of journalists, whose Sigma Delta Chi (now the Society of Professional Journalists)—its membership also only a minority of those working in the field—promised voluntary allegiance to an ethics code. PRSA in 1963 took a step beyond journalists with introduction of accreditation (Schoch, 1984; Swain, 1978).

Despite these strides, a leading practitioner detected in the 1960s "a great deal of public unease about persuasion" (Marston, 1967). It was intensified by publication of *The Hidden Persuaders* in which Packard (1957) presented public relations and advertising as inherently unethical. Packard "preoccupied" writers of the time who "accepted most of his ideas as truths or accepted facts," according to a critic (Mindak, 1967). Public relations was still judged from

a hostile perspective, and still suffers a stigma of unprofessionalism.

Research in ethics is needed to further public relations' struggle toward professional recognition, according to a scholar working in the field who discounts the value of separation from journalism schools as a path to equal status (Wright, 1976, 1982). A body of work, some cited in this study, is building toward recognition of professionalism by examining current practice to support practitioners' claim of ethical conduct. Surveys suggest that "most practitioners at least recognize their own moral responsibility for their actions, an important step toward resolving some significant moral–ethical issues" (Ryan & Martinson, 1984, p. 34). Especially promising are studies such as Grunig's (1979) which provide strategies to assist practitioners in promoting social responsibility, too long a "somewhat mushy term" (Cutlip, 1976).

Bernays Saw Accomplishment

Bernays' truly radical contribution was emphasis on the "results which his work would accomplish from an ethical point of view" (Bernays, 1928) rather than the journalistic "right to ignore implications." Accepting personal responsibility for professional conduct is a standard eluding easy codification because it lacks the conformity of objectivity. If not a workable ethic, it is evidence countering the prevailing journalistic perspective on public relations throughout its history.

The struggle toward professionalism may also benefit from historical evidence of that first step toward an ethical identity in public relations' past: not in Lee's dysfunctional standard of objectivity but in Bernays' disassociation from the journalistic perspective. Bernays recognized the need for an alternative ethic, differing from that of journalists and drawing from more similar professions of paid advocates. His proposal was recently simplified by a PRSA president who welcomed into public relations the "former lawyers, university professors,

marketing executives, and lawmakers to whom advocacy comes easy" (Fox, 1980, p. 157).

Public Relations Growth Stunted by Inheritance

The profession's growth in education, practice, and scholarship is stunted by a dysfunctional inheritance Journalists cannot legitimize public relations without admitting that their ethic is not universal, but native only to the nature of their work Historical scholarship on public relations should counter the paternalism prevalent in journalism education by disowning overreaching evidence of an evolutionary parentage and abandoning the "shared culture" analogy for a metaphor more appropriate to a mature profession with the distinct and equally legitimate purpose of advocacy. Provided with, and recognizing, a usable past, practitioners will be able to assert an ethical perspective of their own.

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