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Searching for Benedict de Spinoza in the history of communication: His influence on Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays



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ABSTRACT

Some ideas crucial for the development of communication as a field are both contemporary and also based on classical philosophical thinking. An example of this is philosopher Benedict of Spinoza's ideas on the power of images and the importance of emotions to explain human behavior. This article delves into how Spinoza's ideas have been transmitted to classic public relations authors such as Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays through the works of their masters and their mentors: George Santayana, who was one of Lippmann's philosophy professors at Harvard, and Sigmund Freud, an uncle of Bernays whose psychoanalysis theory shaped Bernays' approach to persuasion. In contrast to these public relations masters of persuasion who had a pessimistic view of the human condition, Spinoza's *Ethics* is based on a positive anthropology of man that squares well with contemporary and more ethical relationship-building approaches to public relations.

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“Video meliora, proboque, deteriora sequitur” (I see and approve the better, but follow the worse) (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*)

1. Introduction

This is an article about the history of ideas in public relations. The field of public relations implies that relationship building and the cultivation of publics are based on the knowledge of some basic principles of human behavior that can be traced back to the history of philosophy. Indeed, there is not much record of how the ideas of the relative short list of pioneers, gurus and forerunners that shaped the field of PR in the 20th century have been forged. If there is, such as the case of how Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory influenced his nephew Edward Bernays' work, this influence can be circumvented, for example by the fact that a number of Freud's theories had also their origin in classical philosophical thinking.

In comparison to other major thinkers or philosophers whose ideas have been extensively discussed in the public relations field, such as Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1513) (Harris & Locke, 1996; Harris, Moss, & Vetter, 1999; Moore, 2012)

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or Immanuel Kant (L'Etang, 1992; Bowen, 2005), the philosophy of Benedict of Spinoza (1632–1677) has scarcely been analyzed. On the few occasions when Spinoza is cited, it has been to trace analogies between his *Ethics* (1677), where he exposes the difficulty for human beings to reconcile reason and selfishness, and critiques of a lack of ethics among public relations practitioners who, challenging their own reason, need to believe the truth as defined by someone above them in an organization (Sharpe, 2000). From a communication perspective, some authors mention Spinoza as an early supporter of freedom of expression (Bivins, 2004) as well as an advocate of the use of representative symbols by the man of power to gain the respect of the masses (Feuer, 1987).

This article delves into the influence of Benedict of Spinoza's *Ethics* on the view of communication of two pioneers of modern PR: Walter Lippmann and Edward Bernays. Spinoza's influence on Lippmann can be seen in two key ideas: first, the role of passions in confusing human judgments; second, the distinction between words, images and ideas. These two ideas mold Lippmann's concept of stereotype that explains the human management of perceptions. Bernays also echoes Spinoza's thinking on the power of emotions in the subconscious in his *Ethics*, particularly the section titled *Of human bondage or the power of affects*. In both cases, there are reasons to believe the influence of the Dutch philosopher was transmitted through their masters and mentors: George Santayana in the case of Lippmann, and his uncle Sigmund Freud in the case of Bernays. The influence of Spinoza on Bernays follows a double path since the Lippmanian concept of stereotype largely explains Bernays' approach to the role of emotions in communication.

Benedict of Spinoza concluded that, due to the biases of human perception and behavior, people are guided by their own self-interest and cannot live purely in accord with the dictates of reason when distracted by the claims of public business. I propose that Spinoza has influenced the history of ideas in the field of public relations through the transmission of his ideas to Lippmann's and Bernays' masters and mentors, George Santayana and Sigmund Freud, respectively.

These connections highlight the link between the history of ideas and the history of public relations beyond the framework of conflict and power as they have traditionally been approached through the analysis of figures like Machiavelli, Lippmann or Bernays. This paper argues that the history of public relations and publicity in general is based on a pessimistic view of human beings that has its roots in 17th century thinking and tends to emphasize humans' lack of virtue and rationality as exemplified by their incapacity to differentiate between images, words and ideas. According to this interpretation, persuasive public relations models can be considered based on a pessimistic view of human beings, while more recent non-persuasive two-way communication models are more in agreement with Spinoza's philosophy that relationship building should not exclude thought and reflection. In this sense, the diagnosis and optimism of Spinoza's philosophy offers support to advocates of public relations based on values such as rationality and detachment.

2. The ethics

From a communication perspective, Spinoza can be read in a number of ways. Scruton (1986) argues his political writings bear comparison with the *Prince* and the *Discourse* of Machiavelli, to which he was indebted for the style and structure of his *Political Treatise*. Del Lucchese (2009) describes Spinoza and Machiavelli as realistic and anti-utopian thinkers who see political life as conflict, tension and struggle. They both acknowledge the role of the crowd, “*popolo*” for Machiavelli and “*multitude*” for Spinoza, which can be positive or negative, rational or irrational, just as individuals are.

The connection between Spinoza, Lippmann and Bernays has more to do with the content of Spinoza's *Ethics*. In this seminal book, Spinoza tries to look for a response about the place of the human being in the natural order. This question took on new form and importance in the intellectual and cultural life of the 17th century due to the historical context of Northern Europe (the scientific revolution, the reality of religious pluralism, and the rise of bourgeois capitalism).

Spinoza's solution is to think of humans as mere pieces of the natural world. He argues that a single self-subsistent substance called “*God or Nature*” is the direct or indirect cause of all things. This major force is self-created and would have created humans too. Using a materialist as well as a determinist perspective, Spinoza explains the presence of emotions, passions and vices in human beings according to the existence of a law of physics whereby the thought of an object always is the cause of pleasure or pain.

Human beings are governed by their affects (emotions) but at the same time Spinoza indicates “there is no affection of the body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct concept” (Spinoza, 1996, p. 163). Spinoza makes a distinction between passive and active emotions, the former being those which are conscious and rationally understood and the latter those which are irrational and unconscious. Human beings can transform passive into active emotions through reflection and knowledge. When the systematic knowledge of the workings of the mind matches systematic knowledge of physics, we can gain control of our sentiments and follow a consistent path toward freedom of mind and happiness. In other words, if we are able to understand the causes of facts, we will be emotionally at ease with ourselves.

Spinoza was particularly crucial to Lippmann's conception of communication, public opinion and stereotype. His influence on Lippmann can be seen in two key ideas: first, the role emotions play in confusing human judgments due to the tyranny of the multitude or public opinion, which can be seen in his books *Public Opinion* (Lippmann, 1997 [1922]), *A phantom public* (1925) and *A preface to morals* (1929). Second, his influence can be seen in the distinction regarding the perception of reality between words, images and ideas, since these represent main sources of individual knowledge (García, 2006).

While Lippmann has traditionally been seen as an intellectual who denounced and deconstructed the tyranny of thinking imposed by public opinion and the manipulation it exerted on individual minds, it is also true that his view of society emphasized the importance of communication management by governments to build a harmonious society (García, 2010).

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