



Bismarck, propaganda and public relations



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ABSTRACT

Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), the “Iron Chancellor” and master-statesman of Victorian Europe, has been viewed as one who took an appropriately rigid view of public communication activities and most especially media management. Does he have a partial claim to the title deeds of what later became public relations? This paper examines Bismarck’s approach to managed public communication and the extent of its application as propaganda. We conclude that Bismarck’s techniques are a part of the legacy of modern public relations as practiced by Governments.

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1. Bismarck and the legacy of managed public communication

For many years Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), the “Iron Chancellor” and master-statesman of Victorian Europe, has been viewed as one who took an appropriately rigid view of public communication activities and most especially media management. Can he lay any claim to the title deeds of what later became public relations?

Such a claim is without doubt contentious. While Bismarck was managing public communication, he was also attempting to dictate to the media, gag the press, and suppress dissent. [Bentele and Wehmeier \(2003\)](#) summarized Bismarck’s public communication activities in his time as Prussian Prime Minister and Chancellor of Imperial Germany, a period of twenty-eight years (1862–1890). Bismarck, they point out: “tried to either prohibit or exploit the press” (p. 201). His approach has been called:

A mix of banning newspapers, legally persecuting journalists and publishers, and manipulating media content (p. 201).

After the creation of the German Empire in 1871, to take one instance, the new government:

Established a press office in the Foreign Ministry. One of the main forces behind this was Imperial Chancellor Bismarck, who aligned and combined foreign political action, diplomacy, and media campaigns ([Schoeneberger, 1981](#)). One of the innovations of the press office was press conferences with carefully selected journalists; however, as Schoeneberger pointed out, manipulation and corruption were rife ([Puchan, 2006](#), p. 113).

Bismarck “dominated the Foreign Office and he had made his own foreign policy” ([Hill, 1967](#), p. 550) and in doing so was conscious of managing public opinion. The famous Ems Telegram, for instance, helped create the German Empire by

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inflaming the 1870–1871 Franco-Prussian War. In its original form it was a description by the Prussian King's secretary Abeken of King Wilhelm's brief meeting with the French Ambassador Benedetti. This was sent to Bismarck, and the King gave him permission to release an account of the events. Although Bismarck denied changing the story, he edited the report, sharpening the language. He cut out Wilhelm's conciliatory phrases and emphasized that France demanded, under threat of war, that the Hohenzollern candidacy for the Spanish throne be withdrawn.

In communication terms alone, Bismarck's legacy is unattractive, particularly when it is remembered who later revered him. A month after Hitler took power, the new Reichs Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda Josef Goebbels "celebrated Bismarck's birthday on 1 April, 1933 and compared him with Hitler" (Urbach, 1998, p. 1150). Hitler too references Bismarck in *Mein Kampf*, often in conjunction with references to Frederick the Great. These though were made for the purposes of legitimizing Hitler's claim to power, not to imitate his public communication techniques.

Nevertheless, Goebbels, like Bismarck, established a state propaganda machine, albeit one with more extensive powers of coercion and control over more kinds of media.

What then, does the Bismarckian apparatus of public communication have to do with PR? Do bribery, suppression and media control tarnish modern PR practice? Regardless of the answer to this last question few activities, people or institutions can lay claim to an untarnished inheritance, and PR cannot undo its historical relationship to the communication practices now described as Propaganda. Moloney has described modern public relations as "weak propaganda" (Moloney, 2006, pp. 13, 165). In this definition, PR is not only, if very much at all, the presentation of information, or seeking an exchange with its target audiences. Because PR is practiced by organizations, profit and non-profit alike, it must pursue their objectives, reflect their beliefs, and therefore have a strong element of self-interest:

PR propaganda is the one-sided presentation of data, belief, an idea, behaviour, policy, a good or service in order to gain attention and advantage for the message sender. It seeks attention and advantage through attitudinal change and then through behavioural compliance (Moloney, 2006, pp. 167).

The connections between PR and Propaganda cannot be clarified without historical study. "Public Relations" is but the latest name for the management of public communication by organizations (Bernays, 1980; Cutlip, 2013; Moore, 2014). The name has changed in the past, and will change again, but the activity existed in history, and certainly Bismarck's Germany, and intensified as the demands of technology and society escalated. It is unwise to overlook the history of any activity because it has not yet received its most recent name, especially when it is remembered that the historical origins of this particular activity largely originated with the state. For a vast period beginning in antiquity the state was the only organization with the resources and need to organize large-scale public communication to shape perception on policies, religions, and its underlying legitimacy (Moore, 2010; Schnee, 2014; Tilson & Chao, 2002). Study of state communication activity is essential to understanding the legacy and influence of managed public communication in society from the premodern to the industrial eras, and the intersections between propaganda and more open forms of communication. Closer attention is now being paid to these subjects in Anglo-American and European public relations and communication scholarship (Carty, 2014; Morgan, 2009).

Public communication activities conducted by a state can scarcely avoid a relationship with Propaganda by virtue of being one-sided, and by virtue of the legal and other resources at the state's disposal. Quite apart from his historical importance as a statesman, Bismarck's activities at the junction of mass media technology, industrialization, rising literacy and modern nationalism illuminates the relationship between PR and propaganda as well as our understanding of the Iron Chancellor himself.

While totalitarians made propaganda a priority – Hitler for example wrote extensively on the subject in *Mein Kampf* – it is important to remember that the term "Propaganda" had a much broader meaning between the wars and for some time after 1945, and not always pejorative. Those using the broader meaning included Gandhi, Carl Jung and Friedrich von Hayek. Practitioners doing so included Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays. Lee spoke on "The problem of international propaganda" describing it as "a new technique necessary in developing understanding between nations" (Lee, 1934). Bernays pioneering book *Propaganda* (Bernays & Miller, 2005) advocated a more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between organizations, target audiences and communicated messages. Gandhi described "propaganda" as one of the three main features of the Natal Indian Congress he helped start in 1894, to campaign for Indian rights in South Africa (Gandhi, 2008, 'The third feature'), which 'opened out and placed before the South Africans a definite plan of action' (Gandhi, 2008, "All this activity"). Jung took a less functional interest in propaganda in later life, sometimes distinguishing it from advertising but generally conflating both as a threat to the human unconscious, severing us from our spiritual nature, crushing individual, irrational elements of our individuality. Hayek on the other hand wrote to the wartime British Government with recommendations for a propaganda program to be conducted in Germany. He used Propaganda as an umbrella term incorporating both good and damaging communication practices:

Propaganda in totalitarian countries is different not only in magnitude but in kind from that of the propaganda made for different ends by independent and competing agencies (Hayek & Caldwell, 2007, "the effect of propaganda").

PR and propaganda are sometimes still used interchangeably in Germany. The Federal Constitutional Court considers propaganda an important aspect of modern democracy when it refers to political election campaigns (Puchan, 2006, p. 113).

Bismarck's communication trajectory took him over this tangled ground, and it is instructive to disentangle his activities so we might better know his influence and an important part of PR's own inheritance.

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