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Commentary

# Let's get dangerous – A review of current scholarship in public relation history

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## Introduction

The motto of this commentary comes from the late Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev, who said in 1956: "Historians are dangerous and capable of upsetting everything". It is applied in an ironic manner, as I wish that public relations historians were more challenging than they are. In this paper the "state of play" in the history of public relations field is considered. It reflects upon papers and keynote addresses delivered at the International History of Public Relations Conference (IHPRC), which was first held in 2010, and journal articles published since 2008. Using these data, recent historiography and scholarship are reviewed. The field, it will be shown, is trending from an initial eclectic, often descriptive, approach towards the more analytical and sometimes critical.

## Reconsideration

I argue for reconsideration of the "Great Men" focus and the Anglo-American primacy (*e.g.* content of many texts and articles. In creating a history of public relations, some scholars and many introductory texts have relied too much on Thomas Carlyle's dictum that, "the history of the world is but the biography of great men". It is greatly concerning that many developing country scholars apply Grunig and Hunt's four models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and Excellence Theory as frames to record and benchmark the growth of their national PR sector using these convenient but culturally inappropriate standards.

There is, however, an emerging historiographic debate, exemplified by Meg Lamme and Karen Miller Russell's monograph – *Removing the Spin: Towards a New Theory of Public Relations History* (2010). Other important contributions are recent books, articles and presentations from Jacquie L'Etang, Günter Bentele, David McKie, Debashish Munshi, and Jordi Xifra. The impetus is growing for a genuine revision of the history of public relations in many countries which will show a less corporatist and more authentic foundation.

There is also a case for a distinction between public relations-like strategies and actions that occurred before publicity and public relations became discussed entities in the late 19th century, which I call 'proto-PR', and 'public relations' itself.

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The exact time boundary may never be defined but publicity, press agentry and institutionalised communication activities were widely evident in some countries from around 1875 onwards.

## Status of the field

The status of the public relations history field can be deduced from the more than 150 papers and keynotes presented at IHPRC from 2010 to 2013 and articles in public relations journals since 2008. The most frequent topics in papers have been event-based narratives, discussions on the formation of professional practice, and national histories. Most have been written in a descriptive or analytical style, with around 17% using critical methods. The picture that emerges is of PR historians telling stories and analysing them but not employing critical methods enough. The volume of papers and the analyses of type and style of article, however, indicate that PR history has moved beyond the "anorexic" stage described so vividly by McKie and Munshi (2007, p. 118).

## Not a new field

Although the history of public relations can be considered to be an emerging field, it is not new. In the 1960s, Ray Hiebert wrote Ivy Lee's biography, *Courtier to the Crowd* (Hiebert, 1966). Each decade since, there has been a trickle of books but no increase in publication. Of course, many standard texts have a chapter on history but there was not a rising plane of publication until IHPRC started. The field thus has many articles and a few books which are mostly very readable narratives, some analysis, emerging interest from major publishers and new energy on the conference and journal article front. But where does PR history go to?

First, the *other* experiences and *other* voices of public relations, outside the Great Men and the western world must be researched. Much of the conventional history of public relations narrative is US-centric, in particular. Ivy Lee's Declaration of Principles, Edward Bernays' self-promoted opinions and Arthur Page's social science approaches have been lauded in general PR texts, biographies and by their own words. L'Etang (2008) acidly commented that "US scholars have always tended to assume that activities referred to as PR have been invented by Americans and exported elsewhere" (p. 328). This is evidenced in Douglas Newsom's comment that: "Public relations is an occupation, some would say a profession, of uniquely US origin" (Newsom, 1984, p. 30). There are other voices and experiences of public relations in Europe and elsewhere that developed separately from the US model, as Nessman (2000) and Bentele (in many publications) have shown. In central Europe, there was a parallel but entirely separate development of public relations in that continent from 1848 onwards.

> The evidence proves that it is possible to speak of an independent tradition of PR in Europe. In other words, the form of communication known as PR is not an American "invention" (Nessman, 2000, p. 216).

## Other experiences

We need to encourage PR historians, many of whom are new to the field, to move from reliance on the four Grunig models as the basis of analysis. Do they apply, for example, to Latvia, Thailand or Uganda when they have been developed from North American experience? These models are, to use a term that borrowed from journalism history, evidence of 'western hegemonic public relations'. My investigation into the formation of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in the 1950s and 1960s has found that western methods of public relations were considered as essential support for democracy through promotion of understanding between nations and as a barrier to Communism. However, unlike western journalism which suffered a backlash from the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1970s, the western hegemonic model of public relations moved serenely onwards and outwards as public relations was internationalised by multi-national corporations and US consultancy companies such as Burson-Marsteller (Leaf, 2012) and Hill & Knowlton (Miller, 1999).

It was legitimised by some authors through application of the Grunig and Hunt models. That may not have been the proponents' intention but it has been the outcome. L'Etang (2008) has argued that the Grunig typology is not appropriate for cultures with "different paths of historical evolution" (p. 319). By applying a framework from a Western corporatist culture to post-Communist Eastern Europe or communitarian Southeast Asia, a dangerous short cut has been taken. More encouragement must be given to nascent historians to go to archives, gather interviews and data, and develop historical analyses.

## Proto-PR

Another issue to consider is whether the history of public relations should be divided into two time periods. The main category would be the study of the organised communication practice and theory of what is widely recognised as 'public relations'. Taking into account the German/Austrian experience, discussed earlier, and that of the United States, this could start around 1875, some 140 years ago. In the US, there is evidence from Curtin (2008), Cutlip (1994, 1995), amongst others, and the recent Lamme and Miller (2010) monograph, that utilities and railways were engaged in PR-like activities around this time. Before, there is much evidence of communication activity which had some characteristics of public relations. This has, however, often been deduced by *post hoc* analysis. There are numerous examples given which range from Sumerian

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