



Corporate voice and ideology: An alternate approach to understanding public relations history



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ABSTRACT

Scholars in the U.S. generally agree that the origins of corporate public relations correspond to the rise of the U.S. Industrial Revolution during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This essay explores the under-theorized relationship between ideology and public relations by examining the role of the corporate voice in public relations history. Evidence suggests that public relations counsel, serving as the corporate voice, created messages that produced and reproduced certain ideological meanings about the corporation. These ideological meanings provided important guidance on how members of the public should think about, relate to, and experience the corporation as a necessary, natural and benevolent organization in society. By incorporating ideological theory as an analytical tool to study public relations history, this article explores an important, but not often studied aspect of public relations history – the development and use of the corporate voice as a site of ideological production.

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1. Introduction

There is little disagreement that the origins of U.S. corporate public relations correspond to the rise of the railroad, the onset of the Industrial Revolution, the development of utilities, and the tremendous growth overall of American business during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many studies show that the need for public relations was precipitated by the needs of big business: to sell a product, respond to a crisis, avoid unfavorable legislation, or shape public opinion in some way (Cutlip, 1995; Gower, 2008; Hallahan, 2002; L'Etang, 2008; Lamme & Russell, 2010; Miller, 2000; Olasky, 1987). These studies tend to detail the achievements of public relations pioneers, chronicle profound moments in public relations history and discuss the effects of particular campaigns. A few address what is likely a contributing factor to the construction of any persuasive message and its efficacy – ideology (Mackey, 2010; St. John & Lamme, 2011).

The studies that mention ideology inspire a novel way of thinking about public relations history and its implications. While these studies importantly recognize the significance of ideology, they often do not offer an in depth theoretical discussion of this concept. Building on these earlier works, this article draws attention to ideology in public relations history, and contributes a more detailed discussion of ideological theory. The purpose is to investigate the role, function, and relation of ideology to public relations history, particularly to the history of corporate public relations as constitutive of the corporate voice.

The corporate voice is a vital part of public relations history in the U.S. and the history of the corporate form, because it served several key functions. The corporate voice provided corporations with an effective way to communicate with their publics – from promoting products to solving crises. The corporate voice shaped the corporate image, establishing a more

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appealing identity for the corporation. Most importantly, as argued here, the corporate voice helped shape the public's ideological perspectives of the corporation, by creating messages that produced certain meanings about the corporation and indicated how members of the public should think about, relate to, and experience the corporation. Although some individual corporations were masterful in their persuasive efforts on behalf of their distinct organizations, there was likely a cumulative ideological effect from the plethora of corporate voices representing a variety of businesses during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The proliferation of corporate voices espousing a pro-business ideology likely contributed to the promulgation of capitalist values, beliefs and attitudes, facilitating public acceptance of the corporate form, even during times of great ambivalence about big business.

This article explores an important, but under-theorized aspect of public relations history – the development of the corporate voice as a site of ideological production. The article explores if or how the corporate voice functioned during the nascent stages of the public relations field to ideologically construct the corporation as a benevolent member of society. The corporate voice arguably constructed the corporation as committed to the public good, and overall social wellbeing, in an effort to contrast widespread, popular notions of corporations, and their owners, as soulless, malevolent giants unconcerned with the welfare of average citizens.

A review of public relations history prompts two important questions concerning ideology:

- What is the nature of the relationship between ideology and public relations, particularly from a historical perspective? and
- What are some of the ways that public relations is enriched by considering the role and function of ideology?

Incorporating ideological theory responds to criticisms of public relations history (L'Etang, 2008; Lamme & Russell, 2010) by broadening the focus of that history and its implications. Aligned with critical and rhetorical approaches (McKie & Munshi, 2009), an ideological approach to the study of the corporate voice provides an alternate way to explore and analyze public relations history, one that can reveal useful and unique insights.

This article begins with an overview of ideological theory that describes the value of ideological theory for public relations scholarship. The overview also explores the applicability of ideological theory as a tool to analyze the function of the corporate voice during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was an important time in public relations history. With the theoretical foundation of ideology established, the article embarks upon a discussion of public relations history focusing on the corporation's crisis of legitimacy. It will address the need for public relations in the form of the corporate voice to ameliorate this crisis of legitimacy, and it will describe the ideological functions served by these efforts. Next, key figures in U.S. corporate public relations history – including Ivy Lee, Arthur Page and Edward Bernays – will be discussed to determine if, and how, their works produced or contributed to particular ideologies about the corporation. Lastly, the article concludes with a discussion of the questions posed earlier and a discussion of the relevance of ideological theory for public relations scholarship. There are many theories of ideology, and taking some of them into consideration in the analysis of public relations provides an interesting way to examine the history of corporate public relations and its role in shaping society.

2. Ideological theory overview

Literature about late nineteenth and early twentieth century public relations practices shows how ideological theory can be used as a method to explore if or how the corporate voice produced particular ideological constructions of big business during a dynamic period in U.S. society. This article joins other studies (Ihlen, van Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Mackey, 2010; St. John & Lamme, 2011) that push the traditional boundaries of public relations conceptualizations by taking into account critical and social theories. Alternative perspectives are necessary, because, as Ihlen and van Ruler (2009) note, "Public relations is often studied from a managerial, instrumental perspective. However, to understand its role in building trust or creating mistrust and in developing – or destroying – a company's license to operate, public relations needs to be studied as a social phenomenon" (p. 1). Scholarship from McKie and Munshi (2009), for example, describes how a variety of critical theory perspectives including Frantz Fanon's views of race, Kristeva's perspectives on feminism, and queer theory's impact on the relationship between gender, sexual orientation, and knowledge can significantly and usefully enrich, and expand the scope of public relations scholarship and practice. The present article builds on that tradition by contributing a rich discussion of ideological theory.

The French first used the term "ideology" in the eighteenth century to describe the critical study of ideas (Kolakowski, 2005). Ideas are important because they shape and organize social relations until they are eclipsed by new ideas that continue to compete for dominance in the public sphere (Wrage, 1947). After the French, Marx later defined ideology as the dominant ideas of the ruling class. The German philosophers of the Frankfurt School followed with their own conception of ideology as a partiality that appears as a universal or totality as it functions to serve particular interests (Althusser, 1971; Eagleton, 2007; McKerrow, 1989; Wander, 1983). Althusser (1971) popularized the concepts "ideological state apparatus" (ISA) and "repressive state apparatus" (RSA). While RSAs, such as the police and militia, controlled the public through violence and brute force, ISAs were institutions such as churches, schools, families, trade unions, media, and culture that garnered influence mainly through persuasion. These institutions were significant contributors to the production and reproduction of social relations. Although corporations are not mentioned on Althusser's lists, during the days of the Industrial Revolution, they arguably functioned both as RSAs and ISAs, depending on the circumstance.

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