



Public relations tactics and methods in early 1800s America: An examination of an American anti-slavery movement



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ABSTRACT

Traditional public relations histories begin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This study expands public relations history to the early 1800s by analyzing the use of public relations methods and tactics in an American anti-slavery movement, The American Colonization Society. In focusing on the American Colonization Society and backlash against it from abolitionist groups, this paper finds the use of newspapers to promote a cause, promotion of high profile endorsements, attempts to persuade a key public, creation of publications, efforts to lobby legislatures, and hired agents to found auxiliaries, all beginning in the early 1800s.

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1. Introduction

This article asserts itself as a counter-point to those who would contend that public relations began near the beginning of the 20th century with corporations and actions of the Creel Committee. It demonstrates an organization that used public relations methods beginning in 1817 in an effort to change public opinion as part of the American slavery debate. The American Colonization Society, an organization responsible for founding the country of Liberia by sending more than 13,000 free blacks to live there, used modern public relations methods. These included placing articles in newspapers to promote its cause, promoting high profile endorsements, targeting a key public, lobbying, creating its own publications of information, and hiring agents to travel the world, raise funds, and found local auxiliary organizations. These methods were sophisticated in their use and developed specifically to persuade audiences that colonization was the best solution for slavery.

This article reviews the modern public relations tactics used by the American Colonization Society to promote its cause. By demonstrating that public relations methods were in modern use prior to the typical start date advocated by experts, this article demonstrates that a rethink of the start date of public relations should be considered.

2. Literature review

2.1. PR history's advent question

Public relations histories have traditionally started with corporate public relations beginning near 1900 (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). PR Historian Scott M. Cutlip (1994) described the reform-minded backlash against the rise of monopolies, privilege and poverty as creating fertile ground from which public relations would emerge.

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This focus and date make a lot of sense based upon the historical tools that are available. Histories of public relations have always been limited by our historical tools and the nature of public relations. History is inherently an incomplete pursuit. Much of what happened in the past is lost forever as it never left a footprint large enough to last until today or for historians to find. “Since the past is gone, historians can only pick over the remains, eye-witness accounts and oral history interviews which all provide authenticity – but only from the point of view of that particular actor.” (L’Etang, 2008, p. 324)

Moreover, successful public relations activities are often invisible. For instance, the public is meant to believe that a story in the newspaper arrived by the good judgment of a journalist, rather than as the result of press releases, phone calls, and intense lobbying from a public relations professional. Similarly, a politician’s apology is meant to appear as though it comes spontaneously and from the heart, rather than from deliberations with image consultants who examine polls and public relations research to determine the best ways to appear contrite. In *The Unseen Power: Public Relations: A History*, Cutlip acknowledged this difficulty in discussing his writing of public relations history. “I set out to trace the evolution of public relations practice from the Colonial period to the mid-20th century. . . . A historian friend suggested that I was trying to write a history of the United States.” (Cutlip, 1994, p. x) That is, it is often hard to distinguish effective public relations from the actions it promotes and messages it communicates.

Given these two realities, focusing the history of public relations around the growth of American industry in the late 19th century and early 20th century, and the large amounts of wealth it created, makes a lot of sense. Because of their size, these large corporations could hire individuals with a job title that included the phrase “public relations.” In addition, accurate recordings were often kept in order for these large businesses to function effectively. The records that have survived have proved to be an invaluable source for business historians who have sought to understand how early businesses operated (Baldasty, 1992). Histories have understandably looked at the artifacts available and concluded that public relations, in its modern form, began when corporations could begin to hire people full time to be solely responsible for its functions. These histories have treated Edward Bernays, Arthur Page, and Ivy Lee, leaders in early 20th century corporations and the US Government, as the original pioneers of public relations methods and tactics.

Lamme and Russell in 2010 provided a counter-argument to this point of view with a synthesis of the existing material “from St. Paul to Theodor Herzl, from Elizabeth I to Frances Willard, and from Glastonbury Abbey to Westinghouse.” (p. 283) Their research found that “no area of public relations history has been adequately researched” and concluded “scholars should continue investigating the ways in which public relations was used by people and organizations before the 20th century.” (Lamme & Russell, 2010, p. 356)

Their research profoundly changes the way scholars look at public relations history. In reviewing their work, Brown notes, “By liberating PR history from its conventional legacy narrative, Lamme and Russell have vastly expanded the space of public relations, and moved it in from the margins of modern business tactics and much closer to the center of intellectual history.” (Brown, 2011, pp. 112–113)

This new worldview challenges historians to determine whether early 20th century corporations led to the creation of public relations or just exposed to history a series of methods and tactics that had long been available to one who attempted to persuade a public of something. Cutlip attempts to resolve this dilemma by claiming that the intent to persuade the public from a corporate standpoint appeared just before the 20th century. “The growing awareness of the need to court public opinion, rather than contemptuously avoid it, emerged in the late 19th century.” (Cutlip, 1994, p. 2) However, this research will demonstrate an instance where the desire to impact public opinion occurred much earlier and an organization that deliberately used sophisticated public relations methods in order to change it.

In reviewing the substantial record of the American Colonization Society, an organization founded in 1817 that contributed to the American slavery debate, this article will demonstrate that modern public relations methods and tactics historians generally think of as coming from Lee, Bernays, and Page were in strategic use long before the advent of corporate giants in the United States. As a result, it lends support to the notion that public relations methods and tactics preceded the industrial growth of the late 19th and 20th centuries and that the giant corporations of that period simply helped bring to light strategic methods and tactics that were already in use.

2.2. Brief history of the American Colonization Society

Calling slavery a major political issue in early America would be a dramatic understatement. The issue was the proverbial elephant in the room in Congress from the Declaration of Independence until the secession of the confederate states. Many in America came to see this practice as morally repugnant, while others, principally in the South, saw it as a critical component of American economics (Tetlock, Armor, & Peterson, 1994).

Over time, many American political leaders came to realize that slavery would eventually be eliminated, either for moral or economic reasons. However, releasing people held in bondage for generations posed serious social and economic problems that needed to be addressed. Some worried that newly freed citizens would be able to control the democratic process and use it to seek retribution. Others simply feared that they would lose their jobs or that the economic upheaval would cause problems. Many, like Thomas Jefferson, opposed full integration to prevent interracial mingling (Jefferson, 1918). Informed by sentiments like those espoused by Jefferson, others believed that existing prejudices would prevent full integration, even in a post-emancipation society.

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