



Exploring the origins of careers in public relations

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ABSTRACT

This study of the origins of careers in public relations seeks to contribute towards historical knowledge of public relations through content analysis of biographies and other published narratives of those who worked in the field within the US and Britain in its formative years. Opportunities for public relations to offer a career rather than simply a transitory job or occupation were identified. The potential for enhanced benefits, including greater income and higher social status, were noted as a result. However, despite evidence of the possibility of professional and bureaucratic career paths, public relations pioneers tended to reflect entrepreneurial, opportunistic and primarily *commenda* (agency) forms of career. Most early practitioners entered the field by chance revealing a lack of deliberate focus on seeking employment in the occupation. Their varying entry points suggest the concept of equifinality (whereby different routes may lead to the same end); although career progression for those employed in public relations support functions, and the experiences of women are largely undocumented. Overall, the tapestry of early careers in public relations reflects a common thread of communications and openness to take advantage of the changing times. Otherwise, few patterns can be detected, with individual opportunities than a specific career path being the dominant theme.

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This paper aims to contribute towards historical knowledge of public relations by exploring the origins of careers in the field through a study of those working in its early days within the US and Britain. In this it reflects Harlow's observation (1981, p. 33) that "professions are shaped as much by the persons who work in them as they are by the body of knowledge the professions represent. Public relations is no exception." Documented histories of public relations to date have used biographies to consider the emergence of the occupation rather than looking at the nature of careers in the field. Neither has public relations been paid attention by those outside the field who specialize in the study of professions (L'Etang, 2004).

The development of public relations in Britain was largely unstudied until L'Etang's extensive consideration of its professionalization in 2004; although a US history had been narrated (Cable & Vibbert, 1986; Cutlip, 1994, 1995; Ewen, 1996; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Harlow, 1981; Nolte, 1979). Literature in respect of work in public relations has been criticised for "widely ignoring career development factors" (Wolf, 2006, p. 175). At the same time, although there is a long history of career studies, knowledge of changing career paths is in its early stages (Valcour, Bailyn, & Quijada, 2007) and there is little understanding of the reality of "how careers are actually played out" (Schein, 2007, p. 575). Therefore, a study of the historical development of careers in public relations offers a new area to be explored.

The concept of a career is defined as "a succession of related jobs arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered (more or less predictable) sequence" (Wilensky, 1961, p. 523). This idea of progress and advancement

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implies pursuing a career brings benefits (such as personal development, greater income or higher social status). A more “straightforward definition of a career is as synonymous with the worklife history of an individual” (Brown, van Leeuwen, & Mitch, 2004, p. 5). Rather than offering a career, the origins of public relations may have constituted a job or occupation. A job involves “a paid position of regular employment” (OED, 1989) without the sense of direction over time which is evident in a career or an occupation. An occupation represents a “holding a place or position” (OED, 1989) reflecting how or where someone’s time is being spent in isolation from any previous or subsequent employment.

This exploration of the development of public relations as a career uses qualitative content analysis (Daymon & Holloway, 2002) of biographies and other published narratives of those who worked in the field in its formative years. As inductive research it aims to identify themes, threads and patterns to illustrate the tapestry (Collin, 2007) of the first careers in public relations.

It is recognized that histories of public relations have tended to focus on “a few colourful personalities” (Cutlip, 1994, p. xvii) seeming to reflect Carlyle’s notion of the history of great men (Kerry & Hill, 2010) meaning the careers of the majority of those working in public relations (including women) may not have been acknowledged, recorded or studied.

1. Emergence of careers – enterprise and agency

The history of the emergence of careers stresses the importance of societal, economic and demographic changes (Baruch, 2004) with the commercialization of the English economy in the 16th century creating “a rising group of enterprising rural gentry, yeomen, and artisans” (Block, 2002, p. 39), which, along with the existing merchant class meant “a broad sector of English society was becoming prosperous, powerful, and independent of traditional restraints in a newly commercial society”. These changes offered new working opportunities beyond those prescribed by a person’s “inherited career” (Lowenthal, 1998, p. 33) where “a person is born to his trade and station” (Hughes, 1928, p. 756); although family occupations tended to continue across generations into the mid-19th century (Moore, Gunz, & Hall, 2007).

The documented US history of public relations places press agency (seeking press exposure on behalf of a client) as the primary precursor of the field in the early 19th century (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) highlighting two prominent “practitioners of this art” (Sietel, 1998, p. 27): Kendall and Barnum. Cole’s biography of Kendall (2004) does not list either press agent or public relations within his career synopsis, highlighting that he was a “jack-of-all-trades” who “in almost all of these occupations” was “swept up in the revolution in communications” (p. 4). Kendall “found a career in the burgeoning field of political journalism” (Cole, 2004, p. 54), before being asked by President Jackson to undertake a role in which he “earned the title of the first presidential public relations man” (Endres, 1976, p. 5). However, this claim is based on Endres equating the tasks Kendall undertook with “common public relations activities” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 20) performed by White House personnel of the 1970s, not any historical use of these titles. Kendall’s later career involved a return to journalism (Manning & Wyatt, 2010) and championing the Western Cherokee as a litigator (Karsten, 1997). It would seem that those crafting histories of public relations used Kendall as a role model on the basis of linking his skills to the modern occupation, whereas Cole did not observe his communicative tasks as indicative of a distinct public relations occupation.

As with Kendall, Barnum has been appropriated in the history of public relations on the basis of his ability to “drum up free newspaper exposure” (Sietel, 1998, p. 29), although he is seen as a “brash huckster” (Harris, 1981, p. 3), albeit whilst being acknowledged as a “master publicist” (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1986, p. 98). Outside of public relations texts, Barnum is termed a showman (Cook, 2005), rather than a press agent, with his career reflecting an entrepreneurial nature progressing from “itinerant hawk” to a businessman whose “enterprises included a staff of thousands; separate publicity, advertising, and acquisitions departments: corporate mergers every few years; and brand recognition on four continents” (p. 7). Within Barnum’s career, press agency appears to be a skill set, rather than it, or public relations, being the focus of his occupation.

Looking for patterns in the careers of Kendall and Barnum, both demonstrated an innate skill in communications and an opportunistic entrepreneurial approach, reflecting the social context of the times as “America was filled with jacks-of-all-trades who lacked the proper training for the new specialized occupations that were springing up” (Cole, 2004, p. 54). As such, neither man was unique in his field (politics and entertainment), and so their presentation as examples of press agents as antecedents of public relations practitioners, seems arbitrary.

The function of being an agent reflects the medieval occupation, *commenda* (who managed trade between merchants), which Weber (1889) related to contemporary ideas of the agent as an intermediary acting between two parties. This can be seen in the role of the first advertising agents who worked for newly launched newspapers as early as 1786 in London (Tungate, 2007). The first US advertising agents, established in Philadelphia in 1841 (Hower, 1939) and New York in 1842 (Tungate, 2007), initially represented the media rather than advertisers (Fox, 1997) before taking commission as “independent space brokers” (p. 14) meaning these early agents were primarily negotiators rather than communicators. L’Etang (2004) claims “a significant proportion of the early [public relations] consultants began their careers in advertising agencies that subsequently developed public relations departments or subsidiaries” (p. 101).

The earliest use of the title “press agent” is traced by Henry (1972) to Duran (probably Durand), the third top executive within John Robinson’s Circus and Menagerie in 1868 (although Stoddart (2000) dates the high profile use of publicity in the circus arena to London a century earlier). Stout (2005) stated Durand was formerly city editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal, whilst Russell and Bishop (2009) note he had experience in the London circus; demonstrating an early link between US and British press agency.

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