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## Public Relations Review



### Full Length Article

# The great war against venereal disease: How the government used PR to wage an anti-vice campaign

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#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article history:

Received 21 September 2016

Received in revised form 21 February 2017

Accepted 6 March 2017

Available online xxx

##### Keywords:

Social morality

Sex education

World War I

Social hygiene

Creel Committee

#### ABSTRACT

Much of PR historiography focuses on the “Great Man,” corporate uses of the function. This study fills a gap in the literature by exploring how a non-governmental organization called the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA) worked with the U.S. federal government during World War I to equate sexual health with wartime patriotism to lower venereal disease (VD) rates. Partnering with ASHA on an anti-venereal campaign provided the government with a way to enhance military efficiency (i.e., fewer soldiers out of action with VD meant more men available to fight). In return, ASHA gained a national audience and the backing of the government for its vision of sexual health and social morality. This study shows that The Committee on Public Information (CPI) was not alone in using PR-type techniques as a weapon of mass instruction during the Great War. Similar to the CPI, the social hygiene campaign organizers used a diverse range of communications activities ranging from pamphlets to lectures to films – all for the purpose of instilling a new social health agenda.

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As he prepared to send American soldiers to Europe in World War I (WWI), U.S. President Woodrow Wilson assured the nation: “The men committed to its [the federal government’s] charge will be returned to the homes and communities that so generously gave them with no scars except those won in honorable conflict” (“[Standard forms of laws...](#),” n.d., p. 5). The dishonorable scars he alluded to were those caused by venereal diseases (VD) such as gonorrhea and syphilis.

The military had reason to fear VD. During the American Civil War almost 20 percent of those fighting acquired VD (“[Incidence of gonorrhea and syphilis,](#)” n.d.). In 1907, the U.S. army reported 167.8 VD infections per 1000 soldiers (Kellog, 1914, p. 51). By 1917, those numbers had risen to 240 infections per 1000 white soldiers and 625 infections per 1000 among black troops (Snow, n.d., p. 38).

Military officials recognized the problem, but they lacked the expertise to wage an anti-VD campaign. The leaders of a non-governmental organization (NGO) called the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), which had been fighting VD through sex education since its inception in 1914, offered to help the government with this issue. During the Great War, ASHA officials became the leaders of a new federal government agency called the Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA), through which the social reformers used persuasive communications to equate sexual health with wartime patriotism in order to lower venereal rates. Partnering with ASHA on an anti-VD campaign provided the U.S. government with a way to enhance military efficiency (i.e., fewer soldiers out of action with VD meant more men available to fight). In return, ASHA gained a national audience and the backing of the U.S. government for its vision of sexual health.

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This paper explores how the NGO-federal government partnership embodied in the CTCA used persuasive communication to create a national sexual health agenda in the United States. The study of the CTCA's persuasive communications efforts presents an opportunity to see the result of the combination of government-style publicity designed to justify policy and non-profit publicity geared toward advancing social causes. By associating their beliefs to the war effort and leveraging the volume and credibility of the government, ASHA officials overcame Victorian reticence to public discussions of sex. This campaign set the agenda for decades of American sex education as it was used as a basis for ASHA's post WWI efforts, the United States Public Health Service campaigns during the 1930s, and the government's World War II efforts to combat VD (Brandt, 1985).

The case also demonstrated how to strategically and intentionally use persuasive communication to achieve a desired outcome. It showed how to structure messages in light of the current socio-political climate to enlist the support of the public. It revealed how to shape the conversation around an issue to inspire collective behavior. All of these activities occurred before the term "public relations" was coined, but they all informed modern public relations. To more adequately examine how they did so, the next section will start with a working definition of public relations.

## 1. Public relations literature review

### 1.1. Defining public relations

The corporate-inspired descriptions of public relations (e.g., management of communication) suggest public relations history started when corporations began using the function as a response to activists. Instead, Coombs and Holladay (2012b) argued that activists began using public relations-like strategies decades before corporations hired agencies or formed departments to perform the function. Lamme and Russell (2010) found that the activists of the nineteenth century offered insight into public relations history because their efforts involved persuasive communications, were strategic and intentional in the use of that communication, and had a desired outcome in mind. Coombs and Holladay (2012b) said the public relations efforts of Progressive era social reformers "sought to create awareness and concern over social ills that would translate into reforms" (p. 349). Lamme (2007) found the Anti-Saloon League of America (1895–1910) used public relations to build public support for temperance (p. 123). Lamme (2014) found that reformers in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century evangelistic religion and social movements were "intentional and strategic" in their use of persuasive communications to "influence public sentiment toward some planned outcome" (p. 5). Myers (2016) said, "The early use of [information] bureaux by churches is significant because it suggests organizations may have borrowed the practice of bureaux from grassroots organizations" (p. 772). The actions of these activists mirror and predate those of their corporate public relations peers. This study, then, will use a more inclusive definition that allows that public relations activities were in use long before a corporate public relations department or agency was formed.

Russell and Lamme (2016) said that "public relations historians should consider the strategic intent of the practitioners" (p. 4), as well as the ability of its audiences "to respond, reject, seek alternative information, share their own opinions, and make independent decisions without coercion or fear of violence" (p. 5). The authors argued that their "strategic intent/human agency" dynamic dovetailed with critical-cultural approaches, which described "public relations as a process of meaning making" (p. 6). In this view, meaning is negotiated, with public relations practitioners needing to understand social contexts as well as the message producers and consumer (Curtin, Gaither & Ciszek, 2015; Ihlen & van Ruler, 2009). With the perspective of public relations as a cultural practice rather than just an organizational function, Zhang (2006) described it as a "meaning-construction process through the use of symbols, interactions and interpretations" (p. 27). Coombs and Holladay (2012a) added that public relations "Practitioners create discourses that present and justify their view of the world" (p. 881). These views cast public relations practitioners as one actor among many in the quest for meaning making. For this study, then, public relations is the strategic and intentional participation in the social construction of meaning to achieve a planned outcome (Braun, 2014). This definition opens possibilities for exploring non-corporate public relations history, especially how activists have used public relations and its antecedents.

### 1.2. Activists and public relations

Activists attempt to inspire others to join their cause so this "collective behavior" can drive substantive, long-term social change (Tilly, 2008). In order to instigate this social movement, an activist organization has to create an ideology that brings meaning to situations, classifies solutions, rationalizes actions, and inspires participation (Noakes & Johnston, 2005). Noakes and Johnston (2005) identified four components of a successful ideological narrative: a significant grievance, an adversary, a galvanizing goal, and a feasible solution. In this study, ASHA officials (who became CTCA leaders) fought ignorance and prostitution (adversaries), which they blamed for rising VD rates (grievance), through education (solution) to ensure moral and social purity (goal).

Disseminating information about an ideology requires the use of persuasive communications, and this study delves deeper into how social hygiene reformers used this activity. In order to accomplish their goals of attitude and behavior change, CTCA officials used a diverse range of communications activities including segmenting their key publics – by profession (military personnel), by gender (male recruits and soldiers, and women), and by geography (the communities near military camps);

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