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### Full Length Article

# Reconsidering early U.S. public relations institutions: An analysis of publicity and information bureaux 1891–1918<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the United States popular press' representation of publicity and information bureaux from 1891 to 1918. Specifically this study discusses these bureaux' relationship with the press, use by governments, role in political campaigns, and function within non-profit organizations. Publicity and information bureaux are an important part of public relations history and identity because they represent the departmentalization of PR within organizations. Implications for PR historiography are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The professionalization of public relations is important for both PR theory and practice. Recognizing PR as a stand-alone profession lends legitimacy to the field and also provides scholars the ability to identify, categorize, and critique industry practices. However, the current history of U.S. public relations provides an inaccurate and under-inclusive narrative of the history of PR professionalization. One major area of American PR professionalization that is largely unexamined is the publicity and information bureaux of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Publicity and information bureaux are an important part of U.S. public relations history and identity because they represent an early example of departmentalization of PR within organizations.

Despite their importance, relatively little is known about these bureaux. One of the few mentions of publicity bureaux is found in Cutlip's (1994) history of twentieth century public relations in which he identified the first PR firm named the Publicity Bureau founded in Boston in 1900. However, Cutlip (1994) did not explore publicity bureaux outside of the context of this large Boston firm. In his history of PR, Edward Bernays (1952) ignored the publicity bureau altogether and equated early PR development to George Creel's Committee for Public Information that operated during World War I (an organization where Bernays worked). Other influential PR scholars, such as Grunig and Hunt (1984), do not address publicity and information bureaux at all, and locate professionalized PR practice with tactics instead of professional institutionalization. Even business historians such as Chandler (1977), Tedlow (1979), and Marchand (2001) did not explore the emergence of publicity and information bureau specifically. Instead their work on the growth of professional communication center on technological innovation, strategy, and corporate structure.

Despite the lack of historical inquiry into publicity and information bureaux, they are an important historical phenomenon that was essential to the emergence of professional PR practice. The emergence of stand-alone bureaux in the late nineteenth century suggests that PR was moving forward to be a more serious, recognized, and professionalized practice. Perhaps the

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most important characteristic of these bureaux is that they emerged simultaneously in a cross section of organizations that included politics, grassroots movements, businesses, and civic clubs. They also provide insight into how organizations worked to influence the media to craft favorable representations of organizations. Examining publicity and information bureaux goes beyond merely examining a historical era in PR history. They show how modern public relations practice developed in the United States.

This study seeks to fill this gap in PR history by providing an analysis of U.S. press representations of publicity and information bureaux from 1891 to 1918. This analysis shows that American public relations was developing institutionally in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in a variety of sectors such as: government, politics, business, and non-profit spheres. Publicity and information bureaux were used simultaneously in these areas with government playing a dominant role in developing and implementing publicity and information bureaux. Press representations of publicity and information bureaux suggest they were linked closely with both press needs and public outreach. These bureaux had a sophisticated understanding of communication strategy, and recognized the importance of publics, opinion leaders, and goodwill. Concern over public opinion, media relations, and message strategy dominated the work of these bureaux in all spheres.

## 2. Public relations historiography

Publicity and information bureaux are important not only because of their significance within U.S. public relations development, but because their existence contravenes the received history of American PR. Early histories of PR embraced a linear, progressive narrative of public relations development (Bernays, 1952; Cutlip, 1994, 1995). This narrative rooted the beginning of American public relations in late nineteenth century press agency and argued that by the 1920s PR had become a stand-alone profession that was moving away from its unethical press agent roots. These histories focused on prominent male figures, notably Edward Bernays and Ivy Lee, as leading major transitions in the professionalization of the field. This type of history led to a neat compartmentalization of public relations' past that was popular because of its simplicity and easily understandable periodization. However, like any area of history, oversimplification and neatly drawn periodization leaves out much historical richness and nuance. As a result an incomplete and inaccurate historical account of public relations came to dominate PR scholarship (Bernays, 1952; Cutlip and Center, 1958).

The genesis of this early inaccurate PR history narrative can be traced to books written by Bernays (1952) and Cutlip and Center (1958). Bernays (1923, 1928) began writing about PR tactics and strategies in the 1920s, focusing on how to influence public opinion. However, in 1952 Bernays wrote a textbook, *Public Relations*, which provided a history of the field up until that time. In *Public Relations* Bernays argued that early professional public relations was press agency, which used unethical manipulation of the press and staged stunts to promote entertainment groups. By the early 1900s Bernays wrote that corporations used publicity. While he gave a tacit nod to Standard Oil's PR man Ivy Lee, Bernays (1952) situated himself as the father of modern public relations practice. This first narrative set many of the unquestioned truisms of PR history: press agency was unethical, early PR was exclusively done for entertainment clients, and Bernays was the father of modern PR practice. As a result of this history, other historical inaccuracies emerged such as: PR was created in the twentieth century; Americans invented PR and distributed it to the world; professionalized PR practice was a post-World War I invention; and corporate public relations developed after entertainment press agency.

Bernays's (1952, 1965) work was not the only source of these historical inaccuracies. In 1958 Cutlip and Center's widely popular textbook, *Effective Public Relations*, reiterated this narrative presented in Bernays's (1952) *Public Relations*. Like Bernays, Cutlip and Center (1958) were not trained historians, but were PR educators who were innovators in undergraduate PR training. While their book did not acknowledge Bernays's (1952) *Public Relations* specifically, they reiterated almost verbatim his narrative of press agency, the transition of PR during World War I, and the evolution of professionalized PR practice.

This periodization of public relations was advocated again in Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations. In the textbook *Managing Public Relations*, Grunig and Hunt (1984) put forth a typology of public relations that followed a historical periodization of the field. They argued four types of PR existed: press agency, information model PR, two-way asymmetrical PR, and two way symmetrical PR. While Grunig and Hunt (1984) used these models to explain the types of practices of modern PR, their model lends itself to a historical periodization of the field because each model is represented by chronological historical examples. According to the four models, press agency began in the nineteenth century and gave way to twentieth century information and two way asymmetrical public relations. The end point of the four models is two way symmetrical communication, which is what Grunig and Hunt (1984) argue is a best practice and the approach modern PR should advance.

The problem with all of these early works of PR history is they were done without any empirical evidence. No primary sources were cited, and none of these authors engaged with historical academic literature. Grunig and Grunig (2003) said that as non-historians they "choose not to enter the dispute" on historical periodization of American PR practice (p. 337). None of these authors, save Cutlip, viewed themselves as historians. Moreover, none of these authors received formal historical training, nor did they follow accepted historical methods. Cutlip (1994, 1995) would go on to write more histories of public relations from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. However, these histories, while valuable, do have some issues because they lack any citations to primary sources, frequently use masters theses written by Cutlip's students as chapters, and largely draw from Cutlip's own personal knowledge of the history of the field.

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