

World War I and the birth of public relations

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ABSTRACT

This commentary in the Journal of Professional Communication discusses the historical origins of the public relations profession. It discusses how United States President Woodrow Wilson created the Committee on Public Information which was formed to favrouably influence opinion among American citizens toward the war effort in Europe. Ivy Lee's early influence is detailed, as he was the first one to open a public relations agency. As well, the importance of Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud who worked for the Latin American section of the Committee on Public Information is described. Bernays and Lee moved public relations from the publicity model employed by P. T. Barnum to a model of two-way communication where both the organization and its publics felt that they were gaining something from their relationship.

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When the Great War began one hundred years ago, no one could have imagined what lay ahead – not its intensity, its duration, nor the extent of its carnage. By the time the guns fell silent more than four years later, over 16 million soldiers and civilians were dead, another 20 million wounded. It was, by far, the most deadly conflict the world had ever seen.

The war brought about the end of old empires and the birth of new ones. It transformed the art and science of warfare, it re-drew the map of the world, and it profoundly affected a generation of writers, poets, artists and musicians.

And World War One did something else that is rarely recognized today. It ushered in the age of mass persuasion, and gave birth to the modern industry of public relations.

And it all began with a broken campaign promise.

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In April 1917, the war had been raging for almost three years, but the United States had remained outside the fray. Although supportive of the Allied Powers, President Woodrow Wilson had urged Americans to be neutral in thought and action. Public opinion in the U.S. was solidly behind him. Indeed, Wilson had been re-elected in November 1916 on the slogan "he kept us out of war."

But five months later, the President had a change of heart. Germany was continuing to harass American shipping, and there were real concerns in Washington that the war would be lost. On April 6 1917, Wilson was able to convince Congress to declare war on the Central Powers.

But convincing Americans to support the war effort would be a much more challenging task.

Within days of the declaration, the President authorized the creation of the Committee on Public Information. Under the leadership of George Creel, a former muckraking journalist, the CPI was tasked with winning the war at home by firing up a reluctant American population into what Creel called "a white hot mass of patriotism," and spreading the good news about America and its democratic values throughout the world.

The CPI brought together many of the brightest minds in advertising, journalism, graphic design, academia, and two young men who would go on to be pioneers in a new industry that in 1917 was starting to become known as public relations; Edward Bernays and Carl Byoir.

PR in the United States was only about a decade old when the war began. In 1904, Ivy Lee had established the first independent PR shop in New York City. Two years later, he issued his Declaration of Principles, widely considered PR's first formal code of ethics.

In it, Lee signaled a radical departure from the practices of P.T. Barnum and the nineteenth century press agents who would say anything and do anything to garner favourable publicity for their clients. "Our matter is accurate," Lee declared, promising to supply the press with "prompt and accurate information" on behalf of corporations and governments.

In Lee's view, business had a good story to tell the American public, but that story wasn't getting told because business leaders didn't understand the importance of communicating with the public, and didn't know how to do it effectively. He would provide that service.

In the model developed by public relations theorists James Grunig and Todd Hunt, Ivy Lee represented a transition from the "public be fooled" phase of PR, to the "public be informed." It was based on an 18th century Enlightenment idea that ordinary people were rational and capable of making

intelligent decisions about their lives if given the necessary information to make those decisions.

But could a war be sold by appealing to people's minds rather than their hearts? George Creel thought it could. He recognized that the job of turning American public opinion around would be formidable, but in his post-war memoir, he declared "we had such confidence in our case as to feel that no other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of facts."

But in the same book, entitled *How We Advertised America*, he described the Committee as "a plain publicity proposition, a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world's greatest adventure in advertising" (Creel, 1920, p. 2).

The problem was that as a newspaperman, Creel knew better than most that advertising, publicity and salesmanship were often inconsistent with "the straightforward presentation of facts" (p. 3).

Within months, the CPI had become the largest propaganda machine the world had ever seen. And while its title stressed "information," the Committee's publicists understood that electrifying American public opinion would take an appeal to the emotions, not the intellect.

The CPI's Division of Advertising churned out posters and ads that depicted German atrocities that never happened, played up threats to American homes and families that were wildly exaggerated, and generally appealed to the fears and anxieties that lurked beneath the surface of public consciousness.

They created Uncle Sam and other iconic recruiting images, churned out millions of press releases, bulletins, photographs and posters, even produced silent movies with names like Pershing's Crusaders, and America's Answer. And 75,000 local notables, known as Four Minute Men, signed up to deliver carefully crafted four minute inspirational orations in church halls, movie theatre, anywhere that Americans gathered.

And it all worked spectacularly well. Within months, Americans had enthusiastically shed their initial war reluctance. Young men were flocking to recruiting offices, millions were giving money to support the "Liberty Loan" program to help finance the war effort.

And all of this was observed with great interest by Edward Bernays. When the war broke out, Bernays was hired to write propaganda for the CPI's Latin American section. He was a 26 year old publicist based in New York City, with very big ambitions.

He was the nephew of Sigmund Freud and he shared his uncle's fascination with the unconscious mind. But while Freud sought to liberate people from their subconscious drives and desires, Bernays wanted to explore how

appeals to the subconscious could motivate large groups of people, and harness those passions for commercial ends.

His work with the CPI had convinced him that if you could sell war by appealing to images and symbols then you could do the same thing to sell just about anything. "I decided that if you could use propaganda for war, you could certainly use it for peace," he told a BBC interviewer in the 1990s.

Bernays returned to New York after the war and set himself up as a "counsel on public relations," determined to put his theories into action.

One of his earliest successes was for the American Tobacco Company. They had hired Bernays to figure out a way to get American women to feel comfortable about smoking in public. After consulting a colleague of his uncle's, Bernays concluded that women needed to see cigarettes as "torches of freedom" that would help emancipate them from the social taboos imposed on them by men.

So he arranged for several young women to walk down 5th Avenue in New York during the Easter parade, smoking. As Bernays expected, the story made front page news across the country and the taboo against women smoking in public began to break down.

Bernays had concluded that public opinion was fundamentally irrational, and irrationality was now the filter through which human nature could best be understood. The primary job of the public relations counsel would not be to inform the public, but to persuade it. They would be "engineers of consent," developing communications strategies that aimed more for the gut than the brain.

His experience working for the CPI had convinced Bernays that the Enlightenment idea that people were able to make intelligent decisions if given the necessary information was no longer correct. The facts of the modern world were simply too complex for the average person to understand.

According to Stuart Ewen, author of the book *PR: A Social History of Spin* (1996), Bernays "didn't have much respect for the thinking capacity of your average individual. So what was required for the society to function was that you have an intelligent few, a group of people who are intellectually viable and are able to understand things."

In a book called *Propaganda*, published in 1928 (in the 1920's, the words propaganda and public relations were used interchangeably), Bernays wrote about "an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country." (p. 9) This small group of people "understand the mental processes and social pattern of the masses. It is they who pull the wires which control the public mind."

Power within the invisible government was concentrated in very few hands “because of the expense of manipulating the social machinery which controls the opinions and habits of the masses” (p. 37). And because propaganda was so expensive to disseminate, only the “propaganda specialist” (p. 37) could be trusted to do the job properly. And the person best suited to assume this critical role was the public relations counsel, “the agent who, working with modern media of communication and the group formation of society, brings an idea to the consciousness of the public” (p. 38).

Bernays had placed persuasion at the centre of public relations, and of democratic life. He believed that “the right of persuasion” was as important a part of the Bill of Rights as freedom of speech and the press. He had pioneered the notion that PR was a “two way street,” because governments and corporations had to work hard to understand what the public was thinking. This led to the growth of market research and public opinion polling. But it was hard for anyone who followed Bernays’ ideas about public relations not to think that its primary purpose was manipulation rather than genuine communication.

For Edward Bernays, the “astounding success” (p. 28) of the Committee on Public Information was the key to the evolution of public relations. He had seen public opinion molded in ways he had not previously imagined. “The war,” Bernays wrote in *Propaganda*, “opened the eyes of the intelligent few in all departments of life to the possibilities of regimenting the public mind” (p. 27).

The age of mass persuasion was born out of the horrors of the Great War.

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