

The War for the Public's Mind

Public Relations

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Public Diplomacy and Public Relations

Public diplomacy is defined as “the efforts of one nation’s government to influence the public or elite opinion in a target nation for the purpose of turning the foreign policy of the target nation into an advantage.”¹ Public diplomacy encompasses the use of public relations (PR) to cultivate favorable impressions of foreign countries, through the use of mass media, the most common method to reach foreign populations. It is different from cultural propaganda, which uses alternative ways to implement a long-term process to promote a better understanding of the nation that is sponsoring the activity. Therefore, it is more aligned with *sociological propaganda*, which mimics social forms that are least suspected in traditional propaganda.²

Foreign governments often use public diplomacy to counter foreign government propaganda within their borders.³ Furthermore, some states have decided to create their own means of international mass media by broadcasting in different

languages.⁴ Additionally, nongovernmental actors can also be used to influence foreign governments' decisions, as in the case of human rights movements that have been decisive in political warfare in various clashes among countries.⁵ *Many of these actors are artificial and created through a technique called astroturfing, which will be discussed later.* However, PR firms are often used for public diplomacy, as they are much more effective than direct government involvement in campaigns, as they specialize in manipulating the target society.⁶

PR is intricately linked to public diplomacy in theoretical and practical terms. Both disciplines share elements that make differentiation from each other nearly impossible. PR professor Jacquie L'Etang tells us that diplomacy is a necessary part of PR, while PR is an essential part of diplomacy. Both disciplines carry out open and covert operations, as well as develop *psychological operations* within *information warfare*. In the end, both disciplines are considered types of propaganda.⁷ Today the US uses its National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication to develop communication strategies that affect the hearts and minds of foreign countries.⁸

Public Relations and Propaganda

Philip M. Taylor considers propaganda to be an attempt to persuade people to think and act in a manner desired by the propagandist. He also finds PR as a communicative process designed to improve relations between an organization and the public. Thus, like propaganda, PR is a way of influencing the public but with a semantic difference.⁹ Propaganda and PR have a deep and intertwined relationship, as PR cannot be understood without the application of propaganda.

L'Etang explains that propaganda used in England during the interwar period was considered an indispensable tool to keep mass society under control. During World War II, the propaganda machine grew even more. According to the author, the distinction between propaganda, PR, information, intelligence, persuasion, and psychological warfare has only become more difficult to distinguish.¹⁰ Likewise, Johanna Fawkes, also a PR professor, explains that propaganda is difficult to differentiate from persuasion or PR. This occurs because the origin of PR resides in propaganda and because many of the pioneers of PR came from the era of war propaganda.¹¹

Johan Carlisle gives us a more concise view of the relationship between propaganda and PR. The journalist suggests that while propaganda is negatively linked to Goebbels and fascism, PR is the same profession, but white collar.¹² Like Fawkes, L'Etang explains that after World War I, the PR market became professionalized by using the specialized human capital that had been developed for

psychological warfare during the war. This, culminated in the establishment of the Institute of Public Relations in 1948.¹³

The author, in another article, explains that while propaganda and PR are concepts that are often used interchangeably, differences can be discerned after analysis. For the author, PR goes beyond the idea of publicity, both on a spiritual and ritual level. PR tells stories inside and outside of organizations, PR is the creator of meaning, and PR tries to convince audiences to adopt the meaning that they give to stories.¹⁴ L'Etang portrays a more complex and orderly vision, a structure that goes beyond the propagandist: create followers to a cause, idea, policy, or product. The author's vision of PR suggests that it consists of complex and professional organizations that do not limit themselves to slogan propaganda—that they can perfectly deploy *weaponized narratives* or implement perception management with a holistic approach.

For their part, Morris and Goldsworthy define PR as the “the planned persuasion of people to behave in ways that further its sponsor's objectives. It works primarily through the use of media relations and other forms of third-party endorsement.” Third-party endorsement refers to independent people who cannot be assumed to have a biased vision of the message.¹⁵ PR has turned out to be an essential piece in the propaganda orchestra, and PR works mainly in the media.¹⁶

After World War I, England attempted to take PR even further. It tried to use mass media not just to inject warfare propaganda but also to develop long-term *political warfare*. Sir Henry Newbolt and Victor Wellesley proposed a sociological propaganda policy in which British interests could flourish. In 1934, the British Council was created to use PR to expand the British way of life and style of thinking to the rest of the world and the use of the English language to attract the world to English culture¹⁷.

Ellul's explanation agreed with the idea that in the contemporary world, the individual is not part of the formation of public opinion. Furthermore, he stated that restricted access to media makes the creation of public opinion a conflict among states and power groups, as citizens are excluded from this fight because they do not have access to mass media.¹⁸ Ellul states how the US also used propaganda through PR, and thus, an era of the massive use of propaganda techniques began, with more sophisticated techniques of social manipulation through PR via governments' direct access to mass media.¹⁹

Public Relations and Politics

In politics, PR is practiced by press offices, speechwriters, campaign managers, event managers, and political marketing agents. PR is strategic, not tactical and essential to achieving sought objectives. On the one hand, to achieve these objec-

tives, PR uses communication vehicles, such as press releases, speeches, or interviews. On the other hand, PR uses action, such as organizing events or social group interactions. The main areas of PR include news management, political agenda, and crisis management.²⁰ These elements end up converging in mass media—consisting of governmental and private intra-relationships.

Edward Bernays is considered the father of PR, but Theodore Roosevelt, as the US President, institutionalized PR. From 1901 to 1909, the president dominated the news (and controlled reporters) through the calculated publicity of his role as president, his personal life, and the events he planned. Roosevelt pioneered PR by using techniques, such as news creation, opportunity photography, strategic calculation of presidential announcements, and anonymous sources, along with manipulation and coercion of the press.²¹ Roosevelt realized that the curiosity surrounding the position of the president created a journalistic resource, which he took advantage of to create a myth surrounding the office of the presidency.²²

During this same period, PR organizations started flourishing as well. The Boston Publicity Bureau, a PR firm, began operating in 1900.²³ Later, Bruce Barton (a member of the *Creel Commission*—which wrote screenplays for movies), in association with other partners, created his advertising agency. Like Bernays, he dedicated himself to selling cereals and soap to large audiences. He was confident that a political candidate could be sold in the same way, and in the early 1920s, used his propaganda skills to sell political candidates as if they were soap.²⁴

Additionally, beginning in 1904, Ivy Ledbetter Lee and George F. Parker managed the PR company Parker & Lee. In their extensive customer portfolio, was Standard Oil, owned by the Rockefeller family. Years later, they also represented the German National Socialist Government, specifically the German Dye Trust, a conglomerate of German chemical companies. During this time, they communicated peace wishes from the German people²⁵ to the American public and traveled to Germany to interview Hitler and Goebbels.²⁶

At the same time, Carl Byoir, also a member of the Creel Commission, formed the PR company Carl Byoir & Associates. During the interwar years, the German Tourist Information Office was one of his clients, which was very dependent on the National Socialist Party.

PR companies had succeeded in creating a public diplomacy effort that persuaded the US audience toward a favorable view of foreign governments, brands, ideas, or products despite actual events. Thus, the Lee and Byoir cases led the US government to pass the Foreign Agents Registration Act in 1938, to limit foreign countries from spreading counterproductive propaganda to the American people.²⁷

Public Relations “in Motion”

John Hill, the founder of the prestigious PR company Hill & Knowlton, saw his role as the “loudspeaker of the voice of business.”²⁸ With this prominently mercantile philosophy, the company developed PR campaigns to connect its customers with a global audience. It did the same for China after the Tiananmen incidents, the eccentric Korean Reverend Sun Myung Moon, Maxwell Communications, the governments of Haiti, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Angola, and for the International Bank of Credit and Commerce, among others.²⁹ In short, Hill & Knowlton disseminated propaganda of foreign actors with serious legitimacy problems to different national audiences.

Edward T. Walker explains that one of the tactics used by PR agencies to defend the interests of their clients and influence society or legislators is the *astroturf* technique. Walker describes the practice of *astroturfing* as the creation of false groups of social activists pretending to defend a social agenda, when they *actually* protect the interests of the elites that finance them.³⁰ The term was coined by US Democratic Senator Lloyd Bentsen to refer to the artificial campaigns of activist groups created by PR firms to manipulate the flow of information to targeted interest groups.³¹ This concept is known as perception management, which is favored by PR firms.

Walter Lippmann highlighted how propaganda managed the manipulation of perception between reality and the receiver. *Front groups*, as artificial activist groups are called, pretend to defend a plan that emerged from the base of the population, when in reality, they defend the interests of their client. One of the main objectives of these groups is to instill doubt in the public mind about the credibility of their clients’ opponents.³² It is a classic PR maneuver, also known as a *third-party technique*. It has been used by PR firms to defend the interests of consumer associations, the tobacco industry, the Coalition for Climate Change, among many other interest groups.³³ The technique is used when a direct defense of their clients’ interests is not credible or when the use of propaganda would be detectable, as one of the main rules for propaganda to work is for it not to be noticed as such.

Hill & Knowlton carried out one of the most controversial *astroturf* campaigns in history with the creation of the “Citizens for a Free Kuwait” *front group*. While the US government was preparing to start the first Gulf War, the PR company presented a fifteen-year-old female witness to the US House Human Rights Caucus. The witness testified that, in her role as a volunteer at a hospital in Kuwait, she had witnessed horrendous atrocities committed by the Iraqi army. The girl recounted how she saw Iraqi soldiers pulling babies from life essential incubators.

tors and tossing them to the ground, which left them to die. This atrocity propaganda was leaked to mass media around the world. What was not reported was that the volunteer was the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the United States, nor that it reported that it was all a propaganda campaign by Hill & Knowlton and coordinated with the White House.³⁴ Hill & Knowlton's campaign was massive—it organized information sessions about Kuwait at university campuses, organized days of prayers for the Kuwaiti people in numerous churches throughout the country, succeeded in *Free Kuwait Day* being declared in several states, distributed thousands of T-shirts and promotional stickers with the slogan *Free Kuwait*, and pushed hundreds of stories to the media praising the virtues of the Kuwaiti people—and the entire campaign was funded by the Kuwaiti government in exile.³⁵ This propaganda campaign served to illustrate the merits of a totalitarian regime—the Kuwaiti—and to justify the war against Iraq.³⁶ The psychological warfare campaign worked perfectly by using testimonial and atrocity propaganda through its fake *front group*.

During the second Persian Gulf War, the US government hired publicist Charlotte Beers to clean up America's perception in Muslim countries. Colin Powell explained that it was an attempt to build a trademark of foreign policy. He justified hiring Beers because she successfully made a name for herself by selling Uncle Ben's rice and Head & Shoulders. Her PR convinced him to buy Uncle Ben's rice.³⁷ Unfortunately, the campaign did not have the desired result.

Out of all the PR firm's clients in the US, Persian Gulf country clients, whose leaders are confident that manipulating the American public is beneficial to them in many ways, are their highest revenue clients. After the attacks on the New York Twin Towers, Saudi Arabia spent \$83 million in PR. This is because most of the attackers were Saudi citizens.³⁸ The belief in the value of propaganda is so strong that Saudi Arabia signed with PR giant Burson-Marsteller to positively advertise what has become known as the Muslim NATO—a military alliance of 41 Islamic countries. The PR firm also represents the radical group Muslim Brothers and presents it to the Western audience.³⁹ Other countries with legitimacy problems use PR firms for the same purpose. Colombia hired the Sawyer Miller Group to clean up its narco-state image. Burma hired the Jefferson Waterman International and Atlantic Group to clean up its image as an antihuman rights, prodrug trafficking, and military regime. Their primary objective was to get sanctions lifted.⁴⁰ Psychological warfare operations created in the US and funded by foreign governments to reach national audiences have become a standard in the Western mass media system.

Public Relations, the Media, and the Public Mind

Propaganda and PR in Democracies

Not only are democratically deficient countries using propaganda and PR, but democratic countries use them as well. This is because the democratic political system is based on public opinion. A democratic state must be able to present itself to the world as the best choice for most of its population.⁴¹ The blatant propaganda abuses by traditional media sparked the emergence of private television stations, such as CNN, Sky News, and MSNBC, which took over American public diplomacy.⁴² In the 1950s, Joost Meerloo expressed that there was a growing belief in the US that a propaganda campaign could sell any idea or object. Meerloo saw that election campaigns were planned by public opinion engineers, who used mass communication techniques and knowledge of humanity to persuade Americans to vote for the candidate who paid their PR wages. Specialists in the art of persuasion and modeling of public sentiment, according to Meerloo, try to capture the public's mind by using all available communication tools. For the author, persuasion professionals sink the spontaneity and creativity of thoughts into sterile and simplified *clichés* that direct the feelings of the public while making them think their views are original and unique. Western societies give practical sense to the famous phrase attributed to Goethe, "The best slave is the one who thinks he is free."⁴³

Relationship between PR Firms and Mass Media Outlets

Trevor Morris and Simon Goldsworthy provide a map of the interrelationship between PR firms and mass media, and PR firms' influence and ability to insert their content production into mass media outlets. According to the authors, as mass media groups started experiencing a loss of income and field investigations by journalists became too expensive, the material offered by PR firms became a way to insert content without investment costs.⁴⁴ Morris and Goldsworthy refer to an investigative report by journalist Nick Davies. He found that the five most widely read newspapers in England used material from PR firms, or news agencies, for up to 60 percent of their content and only 12 percent of the content was generated by in-house journalists.⁴⁵ PR firms insert material into various categories of the press, including news, entertainment, and dramas, among others. Mass media outlets know they can rely on an extensive system of PR firms for their content.⁴⁶

Morris and Goldsworthy define the content of the PR firms as *subsidiary information*. This *subsidiary information* is not innocuous. It is prepared in such a way that its sole purpose is to persuade. This relationship between mass media outlets and PR firms has emerged as the concept of *PR-ization* of media. However, it is

clear to both sides that this is not a lasting relationship; as the moment that mass media outlets start to lose credibility, they will not be useful to PR firms.⁴⁷

Sriramesh and Verčič point out that good relations with mass media are a mandatory component of the PR profession. This is because journalists use PR professionals as a news source more prominently than any other kind of source—44 percent of the sources used by journalists come directly from PR professionals. Other studies have shown that between 25 to 80 percent of media companies use the news offered by PR firms.⁴⁸ Dr. Sharon Beder, who researches power relations and PR indicates that most of the television news consumed by the public is created by PR companies or specialists and not by journalists uncovering news information. The author points out how it is increasingly difficult to differentiate a news piece from a PR firm from real news, with nearly 50 percent of the news being the product of PR agencies.⁴⁹

Journalist Gómez Municio refers to a content analysis study in Spain funded by the Interministerial Commission for Science and Technology. This study revealed that only 8.85 percent of news was generated internally by mass media outlets and 90 percent was generated externally.⁵⁰ Municio highlights the ability of mass media outlets to construct reality, in this case a reality sponsored by PR firms and other similar organizations.⁵¹

Likewise, Municio explains how events can seem isolated and meaningless independently, and only when filtered or selected using a value system can they make sense.⁵² Robert Karl Manoff wrote, “Narratives are organizations of experience. They bring order to events by making them something that can be told about . . . They make the world make sense.”⁵³ Therefore, it can be correctly assumed that mass media has ceased to be the creator of information, and instead, they have become the transmitters.⁵⁴ Many authors paint the mass media system as a battlefield between different actors and that those with enough power can impose their vision on specific issues. Sriramesh and Verčič refer to how relationships between journalists, PR, and advertisers have spread from traditional media to the new form of media that is faster, more efficient, and cuts costs.⁵⁵ Power groups fight in the media to build a social reality according to their interests. Political, industrial, social, religious, and other actors fight to apply psychological warfare that then allows them to control the narrative on various issues—its *narrative warfare*.⁵⁶

Considerations

Public diplomacy has led to a media war between different power groups, each with different national or global affinities. The techniques used range from psychological warfare and propaganda to newer and more complex techniques involving social manipulation through the media. Initially, governments based the gover-

nance of their countries on the manipulation of public opinion. In a free-market society, the press rented or ceded space in their broadcasts to advertise narratives harmful to national interests. That a foreign country or power group has the capability to influence the mind of a country's population by negatively shaping its cultural perception or that of their leaders is an act of war in and of itself. It is not necessary to send troops to a country to occupy it. It can be done through propaganda in the form of public diplomacy developed by a PR firm—if effect, wars developed by the global media.

Different power groups' propaganda intends to win the narrative war with the use of psychological and propaganda operations. Professional PR propagandists do not need to be concerned with the theories behind media models. They need to be concerned about who controls and has access to the media in the target country, the scope of the media in the target country, and the effects of different media theories. This will enable PR propagandists to manage the perception of events and implant favorable images in the public mind. That is all they need to know to start maneuvering the public's perception in favor of a client within a media system.⁵⁷ □

Notes

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