

PR & Politics; Public Information or Propaganda?

International Public
Relations Theory

Public Relations is a developing industry, increasingly relied on by individuals and organisations to influence their reputation among the relevant publics. Described by its 'father', Edward Bernays, as "a management function, which tabulates public attitudes [and] defines the policies, procedures and interests of an organization" (Breakenridge, 2008), it is usually sourced as a more cost-effective form of promotion compared to advertising - though this is also an area covered under Public Relations. By harnessing themes considered important amongst an audience and strategically releasing information under said theme through appropriate outlets, an individual or organisation can gain awareness, acceptance and subsequent support i.e. through the purchase of their product or service.

The ever-changing nature of what is considered Public Relations can make defining the role and dating its origins difficult; even fellow publicity expert and colleague of Bernays, Ivy Lee, struggled to find a 'satisfactory' definition for his work (Goldman, 1948). Most historians believe Public Relations became a bona fide industry in the early 20th Century, somewhat in response to the rise of consumerism, but mainly as a political tool during the First and Second World Wars (Holtzhausen, 2000). Governing bodies had to inform the public of the progress of the conflict and relay important information for health and safety, whilst also reinforcing a sense of duty to their country and encouraging them to enrol. The dual obligation of Public Relations officers to act in the interests of both the public and political parties lead to an innate distrust toward the industry and blurred the lines between what is public information and propaganda. This distrust of the Public Relations industry continues in the modern day and forms the foundation of many ethical dilemmas faced by its' practitioners. This essay intends to explore the history of Public Relations and Propaganda, before focussing on the events that connected the two areas and how they can be distinguished. Through studying Public Relations theories apropos

existing case studies, It will conclude with an answer as to whether Public Relations is, in the words of Moloney, 'weak propaganda' (2006).

There are multiple perspectives as to what constitutes as propaganda. For some, propaganda is a misunderstood extension of the public relations industry, which can be used to promote both good and bad causes. For others, it is wide-spread manipulation and the control of public information, purely done with selfish intent and an absence of consideration for those using that information. In the Cambridge Dictionary, propaganda is defined as "information, ideas, opinions, or images, often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published, or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2018).

Propaganda and propagandistic literature are evident as far back as Ancient History and is even debated among historians as the primary role of the Bayeux Tapestry (Murphy, 2018). The first documented usage of the term, 'propaganda', took place in the 17th Century during the Catholic Reformation. To aide in the fight of the Roman Catholic Church to retain non-Catholic countries, Pope Gregory XIII introduced the *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, Latin for the *Holy Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith* (Thomas, 2018, Lecture Notes). Propagating – the act of raising awareness and promoting an idea or ideology – was done by cardinals in order to encourage acquiescence with Catholicism. Five years after its' introduction, the *Collegium Urbanum* was set up, in order to train missionaries in the successful propagating of religious dogmas with authority across the country. Whilst the Propagation of Faith was purposed for the relaying of religious ideologies, it can also be seen as one of the first traineeships in a Public Relations industry.

Propaganda developed a political edge during the First World War, when governments began commissioning agencies to advertise the cause of the conflict and to recruit soldiers, such as the Ministry of Information (MOI) in the UK and The Committee of Public Information (CPI) in America. Chaired by George Creel between 1917-1919, his approach to creating propaganda was contradictory; on one hand, he intended to stay true to its' original meaning - a propagation of faith (Kazin, 1995). On the other hand, whilst he was aware of the connotations of corruption for which he believed the Germans were responsible, he described American propaganda as "educational and informative throughout, for [...] no other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of facts" (Creel, 2009). With the phrase, "the first casualty of war is truth" being coined during the same time period, this could be interpreted as the start of the deterioration of trust between the public and the Public Relations industry, as well as the development of its' link to propaganda.

Along with the reinforcement of patriotism and war-time rhetoric came the use of some of the most infamous visuals and posters associated with the era. From America's *Uncle Sam* (Appendix 1.1) to Britain's *Lord Kitchener* (Appendix 1.2), the illustrative depictions of patriotic heroes calling on the general public to help them fight brutish enemies and conniving opponents turned war and conflict into a narrative in which everyone wanted a role (Taylor, 2013). Perhaps the most infamous visual to come from the wars was the Nazi Party's swastika (Appendix 1.3), a symbol which has become so strongly linked to their fascist regime, it is stigmatised to this day. Hitler, who praised British propaganda in his autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (Thomas, 2018, Lecture Notes), established the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment & Propaganda and appointed Joseph Goebbels as Reich Minister (Manvell and Fraenkel, 2010). Together the pair launched a comprehensive campaign to establish

complete Nazi control; in Germany, Nazism was injected into all elements of media, literature and art, with Goebbels's advanced knowledge of radio and newspaper putting him at a considerable advantage over other parties. By aiming for autarky in every industry, Hitler was able to reinforce ideas of glory and German nationalistic pride, all whilst belittling and critiquing the enemy to make the supporters feel a part of something bigger than themselves (Manvell and Fraenkel, 2010). That which did not support the Nazi regime was eliminated through censorship, whether that be a lack of support from their own people to a loss in the war itself. To the outside world, Hitler was able to project Germany as an autarkic Nazi nation, with his self-made title, *Fuhrer*, demonstrating his complete control (Manvell and Fraenkel, 2010).

Though it is undeniable that Hitler's ideals were barbaric, he and Goebbels's ability to implement the Nazi regime to such a wide-spread and concentrated extent could make it one of the most effective campaigns in the history of propaganda.

As World War Two drew to a close, governing bodies of propaganda in every nation found themselves having to perform multiple duties depending on the state of the conflict. In times of success, propaganda became about portraying the home country as heroic and glorifying battle (Appendix 2.1). Contrastingly, in times of failure, propaganda resorted to demonizing the enemy, as well as relaying the importance of everyone doing their bit for the nation (Appendix 2.2). The varying rhetoric of wartime propaganda was cause for skepticism among the public and whilst the wars eventually concluded, the question of validity, purpose and ethics surrounding propaganda continues to challenge the public relations industry. Such is the doubt that surrounds those who provide the public with information, that we are now believed to be living in a Post-Truth Era; we are not only aware of the potential for exaggeration, dramatisation and outright falsehood to be in the information we receive every day (Keyes, 2013), we are also accepting of it. Whilst the term, 'post-

truth' was declared Word of the Year in 2016, it can be argued that falsehoods have been strategically relayed to the public since the 1990s (Foroughi et al, 2017).

Although historically, propaganda has been used for the dissemination of religious, wartime and political ideologies, techniques used in areas such as advertising and promotion have implicated the Public Relations industry. Furthermore, due to the growing expanse of tasks encompassed under Public Relations, practitioners are resorting to different mediums to create promotion, which can result in ethical dilemmas when these mediums are, as of yet, unregulated.

At the core of both Public Relations and propaganda is the art of persuasion and achieving the desired response. As outlined by Jowett and O'Donnell (2006), this can be done through:

- Response shaping, in which the person persuading relays information to the audience like a teacher to a class
- Response reinforcing, whereby the audience is already in agreement with the body persuading, and that body simply needs to strengthen support for them
- Response changing, an attempt to convert an individual from one belief to another, usually proving the most difficult

As these are techniques that can be just as well identified in Nazi propaganda as they can be in modern day advertising, it is important to distinguish the components of persuasion versus what makes them propagandistic. Fawkes (Tench & Yeomans, 2006) identified five such components, known as the Key Concepts of Persuasion. Intent and free will both pertain to the "persuadee's" innate ability to make a choice, as well as their freedom in which to do so. Communication ethics and truth regard the doings of the influencer; if the persuader has provided honest and accurate information, in circumstances which are agreeable to the persuadee,

then this communication also acquiesces with the Key Concepts of Persuasion. The final concept is autonomy of audience. This differs from the concepts of intent and free will, in that it regards contextual influences beyond the persuadee or the persuader. For example, among an epidemic of underage gambling addiction, the likes of Betfred, William Hill and Paddy Power have voluntarily agreed to support the prohibition of their advertising before the watershed (Kelner, 2018). Betting companies are required to provide relevant and accurate information to their customers, including how much the customer stands to lose. The customer will also possess the free will to make a choice on a bet, as well as an intent to do so. However, in light of the increase of gambling addictions, the autonomy of the audience can no longer be guaranteed, as the compulsion felt as a result of their addiction inhibits their freedom from external control or influence. This further implicates other concepts such as communication ethics, as to present betting options to a gambling addict disregards the impact on the customer purely for financial gain. Whilst advertising gambling before the watershed may not be described as propagandistic, it is now considered unethical.

Whilst ethical persuasion may or may not be considered propaganda, unethical persuasion will almost certainly fall under this category. In this instance, the elements of this persuasion can be identified in the Propaganda Model. Founded by Herman and Chomsky (2010), the conceptual model seeks to demonstrate the biases of news media once it is 'filtered'. The first three filters are through ownership, advertising and sourcing. Monopolies rarely control a single media, but rather a network of outlets. Subsequently, these monopolies are able to dictate the topic of discussion across a number of platforms, advertising to a multitude of audiences in the process, safe from being undermined due to strategically sourced information. The final two filters, flak and fear, encompass the management of information to

discredit an opponent and engage the audience in a mutual 'fear' response (Figure 3.1 depicts this fear as anti-communism; however, it has since been updated to describe this fear as a mutual enemy or evil). These filters played a particular role in the impact of the 'Brexit Bus', a red double-decker emblazoned with the statistic, "We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead. Vote Leave" (Figure 3.2). The bus not only villainised the EU by suggesting it was responsible for a financial deficit, but also motivated audiences to vote in favour of Brexit with the fear of losing the British trademark that is the NHS. Whilst it was later revealed that, if such money was available, it was not guaranteed to go toward the NHS, for the relevant time period the monopoly of Brexiteers were able to influence the public and unite them over the rhetoric.

The final theory encompasses both Public Information and Propaganda in a four-way paradigm. The Four Models of Public Relations describe the different forms of communication between an individual/ organisation and its' publics. The most recently identified models are two-way asymmetric and symmetric communication, in which the individual/ organisation aims to act in response to their publics' opinions, obtained through both direct and indirect means. The one-way forms of communications are the ones that will impact this discussion; as they are one-way, their publics are unable to influence the output of the individual/ organisation. Subsequently, defining the intention behind the output is key to defining whether the outcome is Public Information or Propaganda. In the context of this paradigm, propaganda comes under the term, Press Agency, in which the agent aims to persuade and manipulate their audience for the desired effect. Outside religious, wartime and political propaganda, one of the earliest usages for the purpose of advertising was by PT Barnum to promote his travelling circus (Thomas, 2018, Lecture Notes). Barnum's overinflated claims as to the qualities of his circus performers

attracted large audiences and sold many tickets. Though this was only effective once as they soon realised the inaccuracy of his description, the inability of the audience to respond on an equal platform allowed him to continue propagating the show. Public Information retains the same title in and outside of the paradigm and is strictly purposed for educating and informing the public. This is often used in Public Safety Campaigns such as THINK! Road Safety (Figure 4). Whilst the adverts are often emotive, hard-hitting and sometimes receive complaints, the absence of two-way communication is for a reason; their approach is the one that will keep the public safe.

To respond to Moloney's comparison of Public Relations to weak propaganda, its' impact throughout history, including its' induction of the Post-Truth era, leads me to believe propaganda is inherently not weak. From the EU Referendum results to the stigmatisation of the Nazi symbol, and even in our interest of the Bayeux Tapestry, propaganda is not just history created by the winner, but a component of the victory itself. As for the question as to whether Public Relations is a form of Propaganda, it seems dependant on the paradigm. Symmetric and asymmetric models allow individuals and organisations to work with their publics, allowing both parties to mutually benefit from the share of information and shape demand. However, when done via a one-way form, whether this be for good or bad intentions, the objective is to propagate an idea, making it propaganda. This is not to say it is unethical. In fact, as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and other governing bodies continue to develop and implicate codes of conduct, there is potential to influence more and more industries to adopt a more ethical means of propagation.

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Figure 1.1: (Taylor, 2013) *Lord Kitchener* as an example of British Propaganda



Figure 1.2: (Taylor, 2013) *Uncle Sam* as an example of American Propaganda



Figure 1.3: (Thomas, 2018, Lecture Notes) The Swastika, as an example of German propaganda



Figure 2.1 versus Figure 2.2: Example of the rhetoric when Britain was doing well in the war versus when they were struggling or unsuccessful

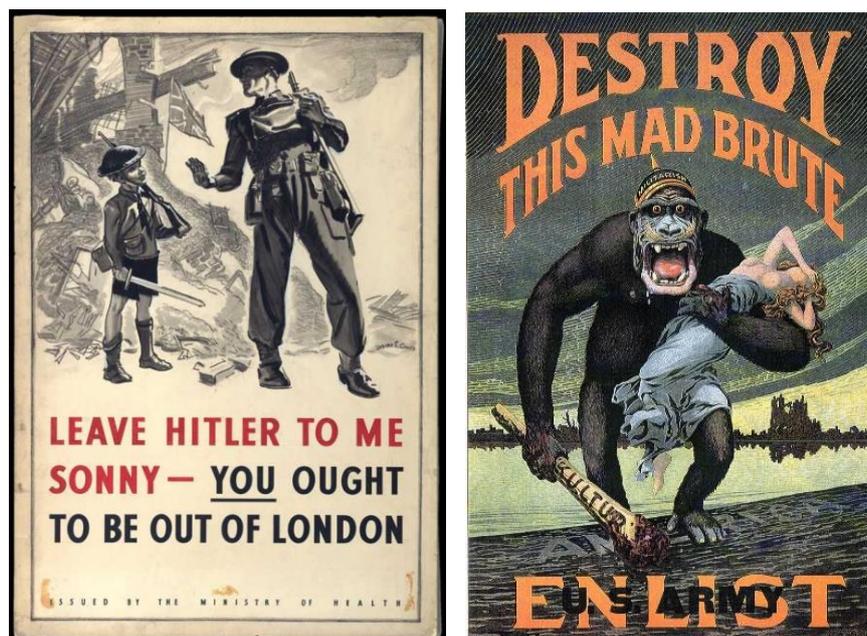


Figure 3.1: (Herman and Chomsky, 2010) The Propaganda 'Filter' Model



Figure 3.2: (Thomas, 2018, Lecture Notes) The Brexit Bus



Figure 4: (THINK!, 2013) An example of! an emotive and hard-hitting advert to propagate road safety

