

PUBLIC RELATIONS vs. PROPAGANDA

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The paper aims at presenting the characteristics, methods and applications of two related activities – Public Relations and propaganda. Although different from the point of view of purpose and results (the practice of Public Relations aims at establishing and maintaining mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its publics, through transparency and honesty, while propaganda insists on a message that is intended primarily to serve the interests of the messenger, in order to influence public opinion and to manipulate other people's beliefs by any means necessary), the two activities also present quite a lot of similarities.

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Getting and keeping a good reputation for a person, company or organisation is the primary purpose of **Public Relations**. As a profession, Public Relations (usually called simply PR) is a 20th century development, but the reason for it – regardless of the name it was known under – has been well understood for many centuries.

Leaders in virtually every great society throughout history understood the importance of influencing public opinion through persuasion. For example, the Babylonians hammered out their messages on stone tablets so that farmers could learn the latest techniques of harvesting, sowing and irrigating.

Later on, the Greeks generally elected their best speakers to leadership positions. Aspiring politicians enlisted the aid of Sophists (individuals renowned for their reasoning and rhetoric) to help fight verbal battles.

The Romans, particularly Julius Caesar, were also masters of persuasive techniques. When faced with an upcoming battle, Caesar would rally public support through assorted publications and staged events.¹

If we were to make a small and perhaps politically incorrect joke, Saint John the Baptist himself did a very good job of promoting the arrival of Jesus.

In the same note, but with a negative connotation this time, Pope Urban the Second convinced thousands

¹ See Seitel, Fraser P., *The Practice of Public Relations*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, pp. 25-26

of believers to serve God and be absolved of their sins by taking place in the Holy Wars against Muslims.

Even Romanian rulers used methods that can be associated more or less with modern public relations. To support this statement, we have the case of Mihai Viteazu and the different manners in which he would receive foreign emissaries, according to his interests. Thus, history gives us two examples. In 1595, Mihai was interested in attracting Poland in the war against the Ottomans. Consequently, he greets the nad've Polish emissary Pan Lubieniecki with royal grandeur: church bells tolling day and night to thank God; courteous questions concerning the health of the Polish king, his captains and entire army; allowance for the ambassador to use Mihai's own parade horse, etc.

The Romanian king used a completely different approach in receiving Austro-Hungarian Imperial messengers. By motivating that he was both fasting and had suffered a hunting accident, he made them wait in the Bran castle near Brasov for a whole month, while he was allegedly recuperating in Bucharest. During this time he travelled only as far as Tirgoviste, so that he pledged his allegiance to the Empire from the soil of his own country, as independent ruler, and not as part of Ardeal.²

As a matter of fact, such practices as the ones presented above represent meeting points of "Public Relations" and "Propaganda".

According to some authors, "Public Relations" began to form and develop as a system before it was conceived as a term. It seems, however, that it was acknowledged at the conscious level even by Thomas Jefferson in his time.

The first data about the term "Public Relations" come from Eric F. Goldman who mentions the fact that in 1827 the reverend O. P. Hoyt was using the term with the meaning of "accurate information of the public opinion".

In 1882, during a lecture held at Yale, the barrister Dorman B. Eaton uses the term "PR", with a meaning quite similar to the one it has today.

According to Newsom, the term PR as we understand it nowadays was used for the first time in 1897 in the Yearbook of Railway Literature.

Edward L. Bernays states that the use of the term PR with its modern meaning belongs to Theodore Newton Vail. Bernays himself is the one who introduced the term of "PR counsellor", explaining in 1920 how difficult it was to implement this term borrowed from the law.

Later, the term "Public Relations" was introduced in Europe by such personalities as Carl Hundhausen who defined this activity in 1937.³

Public Relations is based on the fact that people have opinions of each other as well as of government and other institutions. Therefore, individuals, corporations, government officials, schools, religious organisations, and every other type of institution desire to be accepted by the public on the best possible terms.

The opening of the first PR firm took place after the turn of the 20th century. This is when several American companies found themselves in unfavourable postures due to ignoring public interest in the name of profit. As a result, in 1906, following a series of strikes in the coal industry and threatened by a new wave of protest, the coal barons decided to hire Ivy Lee, a young New York publicist with bright new ideas about gaining public opinion support.

Using simple methods, he laid the basis of a good relationship with the press, creating what we may now call transparency. Thus, he helped American industrialists such as Vanderbilt and Rockefeller,

² Stancu, Valentin, Stoica, M. Marcela, Stoica, Adrian (1997), *Relații Publice – succes și credibilitate*, Editura Concept Publishing, București, pp. 65-69

³ Rus, Flaviu Calin, *Introducere în știința comunicării și a relațiilor publice*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2002, p.52

Jr. to regain public sympathy lost through the obtuse policy centred on profit and neglecting human values they previously had.⁴

Since then there have been attempts to give a precise definition for Public Relations. It has been difficult to find one that fits all situations and all practitioners, since individuals, firms specialising in PR, corporation departments, or government agencies, may handle PR.

In 1923, the late Edward L. Bernays described the function of his public relations counselling business as one of providing “information given to the public, persuasion directed at the public to modify attitudes and actions, and efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its publics and of publics with those of that institution.”

Today, although a generally accepted definition of public relations still eludes practitioners, there is a clearer understanding of the field. One of the most ambitious searches for a universal definition was commissioned in 1975 by the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education. Sixty-five public relations leaders participated in the study, which analyzed 472 different definitions (see Rex Harlow).

They offered the following 88-word sentence: “public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasises the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilise change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools”.⁵

It is estimated that today there are over 1000 definitions concerning the practice of Public Relations in circulation only in the United States. Nevertheless, “public relations” are still mistaken by many with the term “relations with the public” in Romania. They ignore the fact that the practice of relations with the public is in fact only a small part of the much larger field of public relations. This error is due mostly to the attempt of translating into Romanian not as much a name, but a concept. It is also due to the fact that the activity of public relations is still relatively new to us, and its various practices are not yet very well established. Thus, semantic differences appear because of terms used in contexts and with meanings still different from other countries.

It was only in the 90s that the timid PR practitioner, having a job that had ceased to exist for decades in Eastern Europe, rediscovers effective and efficient communication with target –audiences, respect towards the citizen’s need for communication and information, and social value of corporate image.

When successful, good PR presents an image that not only corresponds to reality, but also convinces people it is reality. While most PR is directed outward at the general public or special segments of it, some it is also directed toward people within an organisation.

This brings us to the matter of the publics of Public Relations, which can be classified into several overlapping categories. *Internal* publics are inside the organisation: clerks, managers, stockholders. *External* publics are those not directly connected to the organisation: the press, government, customers, suppliers.

Primary publics can most help or hinder the organisation’s efforts. *Secondary* publics are less important and *marginal* publics are the least important of all.

Traditional publics are represented by employees and current customers; students and potential customers are *future* ones.

⁴ Vivian, John (1991), *The Media of Mass Communication*, Penguin Books, New York, p. 312

⁵ Seitel, Fraser P., *The Practice of Public Relations*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, p. 6

Other categories are represented by the *proponents* (those who support the organisation), *opponents* (those who oppose it) and the *uncommitted* (those who had not yet taken sides).⁶

The Public Relations process involves several steps: researching and identifying facts and information; planning and programming; implementing programs; evaluating results.

PR achieves its goals through connected activities such as publicity, advertising, fund raising, the use of press agents and media consultants, lobbying public officials, public affairs forums, community relations experts, consumer affairs bureaux and any other means that can get a message to the public.

Such an activity can also be undertaken by “unorthodox” means of conveying the message, such as propaganda, disinformation or manipulation.

Propaganda insists on a message that is intended primarily to serve the interests of the messenger. It can also be defined as the spreading of information in order to influence public opinion and to manipulate other people’s beliefs⁷. There are many ways in which information can be transmitted to an audience or an individual. Schoolteachers try to give accurate information to their students, and television news broadcast attempt to provide a similar service for their audiences. What makes propaganda different from such activities is the quality of information and the way in which it is used.

Propaganda can also be viewed as a systematic effort to persuade. The issue here is not the truth or the falsehood of what is said. The propagandist sends a one-sided message, emphasising the qualities of one side and the weaknesses of the other. Political speech constitutes one of the most widely used forms of propaganda in the 20th century. There are frequent cases when politicians running for office try to project the best possible image of them while pointing out directly or indirectly at all the flaws of their opponents.

Propaganda uses the communication media – radio, television, newspapers and magazines – to reach a mass audience. Such an audience cannot argue back, it can simply show approval or disapproval. If propaganda were conceived for only one person, that individual could disagree with it and back up personal views, a situation that is also true of small groups. In fact propagandists are not interested in a reasoned response or a dialogue; what they want is to convert as many people as possible to their point of view.

As an art of persuasion propaganda has been used for thousands of years. In the 5th century BC, when Pericles addressed his fellow Athenians on the merits of their city compared to the tyranny of Sparta, he was making propaganda, though there was a great deal of truth in his remarks. Many centuries later, when Thomas Jefferson and others wrote The Declaration of Independence, one of their main purposes was propaganda⁸.

As a term, propaganda came into use in the early 17th century, derived from a missionary association set up within the Roman Catholic church in 1622 – Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith).⁹

Believers normally view preaching – religious messages delivered in a sermon – as the truth, while atheists see it as propaganda. Even teaching can become propaganda if it turns from instruction and education into indoctrination. Religious schools often teach doctrines and traditions.

Governments have always been chief dealers in propaganda because they always require the support of their subjects or citizens. This is especially true in times of war, when patriotism, self-sacrifice and

⁶ See Seitel, Fraser P., *The Practice of Public Relations*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, pp. 9-10

⁷ Volkoff, Vladimir, *Tratat de dezinformare*, Editura Antet, București, pp. 19-20

⁸ Stancu, Valentin, Stoica, M. Marcela, Stoica, Adrian (1997), *Relații Publice – succes și credibilitate*, Editura Concept Publishing, București, pp. 63-70

⁹ Volkoff, Vladimir, *Tratat de dezinformare*, Editura Antet, București, pp. 18

solidarity become objectives of primordial importance for either side. In such times, propaganda is aimed in two directions – at citizens and at the enemy. Citizens must be persuaded that their cause is right and that they are capable of defeating their opponent. The enemy is denounced as evil and made to fear the military power of local citizens. Propaganda intended to demoralise and confuse enemy populations or troops is called “psychological warfare”.

Also in times of war we may mention the so-called “paradoxical communication” which is based on disinformation and propaganda and has proven especially useful in classified operations. Its basic principle is: “the more likely a certain type of behaviour is, the less probable it is to be applied; and the more improbable it is, the more likely it is to be applied (by the enemy).”¹⁰

Totalitarian states have an advantage over democratic ones in using propaganda as they have greater control over the means of mass communication. They can present coherent and consistent messages to their publics with little fear of contradiction and are fully aware of their need of support from their population.

Initially governments of the Soviet Union, communist China or communist Romania had difficulties in overcoming public attachment to the old ways of doing things as well as with their discontent with new approaches. In the Soviet Union after 1921 a vast campaign using slogans, posters, lectures, and radio broadcasts was mobilised on behalf of literacy and the merits of socialism.

Lenin realised the value of propaganda to indoctrinate educated people. Toward the uneducated ones he advocated another tactic, called “agitatsiya” (agitation) based on the use of simple-minded slogans, stories, half-truths, and outright lies in order to avoid the needs for complex arguments. He combined the two terms - agitation and propaganda, in the term “agitprop”.¹¹

From 1933 to 1945 the Nazi Government of Germany, was also very adept of propaganda. In order to get power, Adolf Hitler used his orator’s ability to tell each audience what they wanted to hear. After his party got into office he installed Joseph Goebbels as head of the Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. In that capacity Goebbels controlled everything, from the press and radio to theatres and films, music, literature and fine arts. He obtained mass support for the war by drawing parallels with historical events and by emphasising the Nazi concept of Germany’s destiny and racial superiority.¹² Many people, including foreign journalists, compared the Ministry of Public Information created in Romania after the 2000 elections with Goebbels’ creation.

In China, Mao Zedong mobilised the nation’s youth through a massive propaganda campaign to stamp out all opposition to his reforms. The result was the “great” proletarian Cultural Revolution, which nearly destroyed the economic and social fabric of the country.

It also served as a model to Romania’s communist leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, who implemented many of the same techniques. Ceausescu indoctrinated youth by creating such organisms as “Șoimii Patriei” (“The Young Hawks of Motherland”, for children up to seven) and “Pionierii” (“The Pioneers”, starting in 1st grade), in an attempt to manipulate young minds who could not compare things and who would be easily attracted by symbols and slogans. Grand “spontaneous” manifestations were organised to praise him, “the beloved son of the people”, “the enlightened leader”. Control over newspapers and national television, with its only two hours of broadcasting in the morning and two in the evening was absolute and permanent.

Democratic nations do not or should never have such complete control of the media. Their governments deal in the open market of ideas, where official propaganda can quickly be contradicted

¹⁰ Rus, Flaviu Calin, *Introducere în știința comunicării și a relațiilor publice*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2002, p.39

¹¹ See Volkoff, Vladimir, *Dezinformarea, armă de război*, Editura Incitatus, București, pp. 49-51

¹² See Ficeac, Bogdan (1998), *Tehnici de manipulare*, Editura Nemira, București, pp. 89-102

by non-government sources. This lack of control, however, is not necessarily a disadvantage. Citizens of a republic are more supportive of their governments because theoretically they need not fear them; the unrestricted flow of information makes it possible for the best ideas to prevail in the long run.

In times of crisis, such as periods of transition or war, democratic governments can be just as effective in launching propaganda campaigns as police states. This fact was demonstrated during the two world wars, when the United States promoted ethnic propaganda against the Germans, calling them Huns – thereby suggesting they were barbarians.

The war efforts of the 20th century have demonstrated how effectively all means of mass communication can be used for propaganda. Posters, war bond rallies, songs, stage productions, radio programs or motion pictures, were all enlisted to help bolster public morale. The American film industry was especially effective in promoting the war effort in movies that depicted the heroic and noble efforts of the Allies against the cowardly and treacherous tactics of the enemy. Although those films were not government sponsored, the producers usually had the co-operation of the United States War Department.¹³

The task of PR is to create a positive image of an individual or institution for the public. The image is not necessarily false, but flaws and faults are omitted, ignored or played down. From this point of view, PR is not different from propaganda, which can also contain true facts. A candidate for office who insists he is the best for the job may prove it after winning the election.

As a matter of fact, Sergei Chakotin divides propaganda into two categories – black and white – stating that public relations include white propaganda, which is the kind that omits false information and has a known source.

The real difference comes from the fact that propaganda intentionally omits personal flaws and faults, exaggerating positive aspects of self image, on the one hand, using half-truths or outright lies about opponents, i.e. willingly promoting a negative image for adversaries, on the other. “Tell a lie once and it will remain a lie. Tell a lie a million times, using all means necessary, and it will become and indisputable truth”, would say cynically Joseph Goebbels.

In other words, the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde formula can be correctly applied to PR – propaganda relationship. The real difference between the two is to be found in the free choice PR implies for its audience, the existence of alternative sources of information, available to the public, that can countermand any message – positive or negative.

If contradicted, Public Relations fail to achieve its goal, become unsuccessful and lose credibility, an option that suits neither practitioners nor clients.

¹³ Vivian, John (1991), *The Media of Mass Communication*, Penguin Books, New York, p. 312