



# First impressions: US media portrayals of public relations in the 1920s

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The paper traces negative and limiting media depictions of public relations (PR) to their origins in the 1920s in order to determine whether modern media characterizations of “public relations” are new or a legacy of the past.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative content analysis was used in order to look more deeply at media characterizations of public relations. *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine were chosen to sample because of their dominance and unique reflection of the era, respectively.

**Findings** – Reporting about “public relations” was primarily fair. Early practitioners were often quoted defining the profession, including “great men” of PR history and more common practitioners. These practitioners of PR are as much to blame for confounding the terms “public relations” and “press agent” as are the media of the 1920s.

**Practical implications** – This historical study sheds a light on and provides context for both the media and society’s understanding of public relations today.

**Originality/value** – While much research has looked at media portrayals and public perceptions of the public relations field, few if any have traced attitudes about the profession to the decade when the term “public relations” was first popularized. The paper remedies this deficit.

**Keywords** Public relations, Public opinion, Mass media, Culture

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Well into the first decade of the twenty-first century, the public relations industry does not enjoy a favorable public opinion. As Coombs and Holladay point out in their recent book, the term “public relations” is misunderstood, tainted negatively, and regarded with suspicion by the public (Coombs and Holladay, 2007). Contemporary attacks accuse the profession of surreptitiously exploiting an untrained and unsophisticated populace (Ewan, 1996; Stauber and Rampton, 1995). Even some public relations professionals are distancing themselves from the term “public relations” because of a perceived negative public opinion about it (Brody, 1992; Sparks, 1993).

Meanwhile, those who teach and practice public relations have tried to clarify misperceptions by defining the profession. While the definitions still vary somewhat, one of the more common ones used in textbooks is that public relations is “the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and all the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip *et al.*, 2000). As Coombs and Holladay point out, the idea of “mutually beneficial relationships” is what has come to dominate modern definitions of the profession (Coombs and Holladay, 2007).



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The disconnect between how the public relations profession defines itself and the way the public understands it can be explained to large degree by the media portrayals of public relations. Inaccurate perceptions and negative attitudes about any profession result from simplifications and inaccuracies in media portrayals (Cameron, 2003). In the case of public relations in particular, most people learn about the field and term from the media, which tends to focus on some types of public relations practice and ignore others (Coombs and Holladay, 2007). Various studies have shown this to be true. Studies of newspaper (Bishop, 1988) and television (Keenan, 1996) portrayals of public relations found the profession is consistently cast as nothing more than attempts to gain publicity. In a sample of three newspapers, studies of media depictions of PR show not only a limited view, but a negative one. A study of print media determined that 83 percent of the references to public relations were negative (Spicer, 1993). A 1998 review of 100 popular press articles found that only 5 percent used the term “public relations” accurately, and only 7 percent referred to public relations with a positive connotation (Henderson, 1998). A later study found 12 percent of stories presented public relations in a positive light, 47 percent as neutral, and 41 percent as negative, with negative depictions more likely when the specific organization in question was a corporation or the government (Samsup, 2003). The same study concluded that public relations is generally associated with image building, reputation management, and persuasion. A study by media analysis firm CARMA, in association with the industry journal *PR Week*, shows a high volume of news stories about the profession carrying negative themes such as “PR distorts reality,” “PR just means publicity stunts,” or “PR pros are just spin doctors” (Frank, 2004). The study analyzed content of 698 print and broadcast media stories from January through July of 2004. A qualitative textual analysis of 136 articles from *The New York Times* during a one-year period in which the term “public relations” or “PR” appeared showed that “public relations” was frequently used as an adjective to ascribe negative meaning to the noun it modified in these articles (White and Lambert, 2006).

The entertainment media has been as inaccurate as the news media regarding depictions of public relations. A 1996 analysis of 11 television programs with public relations professionals as characters found three dominant roles portrayed: publicist, political communication consultants, and negotiators (Choi, 2006). Another longitudinal study of 51 books and 67 movies from 1930-1995 showed that inaccurate and negative stereotypes of public relations have persisted in film and fiction for decades (Miller, 1999).

As the latter study shows, negative media portrayals about the profession that claims to be expert in gaining positive publicity have, perhaps ironically, persisted over time. This begs the question: how and why did such negative media portrayals of “public relations” begin? For that, it is instructive to look at the beginning. That beginning, for various reasons, is the 1920s.

### **Why the 1920s**

The 1920s were a perfect storm of cultural changes that led to the occupation called public relations coming into the media spotlight. After World War One, the country made a shift to a consumer culture. Along with this shift came a fascination with the notion of public opinion and formalized attempts to influence it. Also, there were significant changes in the media landscape that reflected and enhanced the other

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cultural changes. (see Appendix for a timeline reflecting some of these historic milestones of the 1920s).

*Consumer culture and advertising intertwined*

One of the reasons the 1920s were called “roaring” was because of the newfound prosperity in post first world war America. Even before the war, at the turn of the century, mass culture and advanced capitalist society evolved together. Mass culture has been defined as “voluntary experiences . . . produced by a relatively small number of specialists . . . for millions across the nation to share . . . in similar or identical form . . . either simultaneously or nearly so . . . with dependable frequency . . . (shaping) habitual audiences . . . around common needs or interests . . . and it is made for profit” (Ohmann, 1996). More specifically, the post-war culture has been called a consumer culture because of the way corporations began more aggressively encouraging people to buy brand-name products on installment plans (Wilner, 2006). The consumer culture was facilitated by a simultaneous increase in the number of professional-managerial jobs and efforts of companies to advertise products nationally (Ohmann, 1996).

It was because of this cultural shift that advertising, a field often associated with public relations, became accepted as a normal part of the business process in the 1920s (Stole, 2006). Companies began to see advertising as a mandatory business expense to maintain their market share, and the public saw advertising as the forum in which they were made aware of the bounty of new products becoming available to them each year. Of course, the acceptance of advertising was not total. The Federal Trade Commission had been formed in 1914 to protect consumers from advertising, and a 1912 law required all paid media content to be labeled “advertising” (Sloan, 2005). Further evidence of the proliferation of advertising and a consumer culture in this era is seen in the advertising industry’s own efforts to both defend and regulate itself because they noted a wariness on the part of some segments of the public with regard to deceptive advertising practices. Better to regulate themselves, advertisers thought, than be subject to overly restrictive government regulation. Various public relations efforts were engaged on behalf of the advertising profession. The American Association of Advertising Agencies (called the 4As today) was formed in 1917 with 1400 agencies as members. In 1929, the Advertising Federation of America (AFA) was formed to promote the profession and standardize policies. The national Better Business Bureau that started to handle consumer complaints in 1925 was actually set up by local ad clubs across the country (Stole, 2006). Public suspicion of the business claims of advertising, which culminated in consumer activism in the 1930s, may have seeded skepticism about public relations in the 1920s among a public that likely saw little distinction between advertising and public relations when it came to corporate messages.

For various reasons, historians have noted that the 1920s was the decade when advertising matured from handbills and small text ads with simple information to more sophisticated formats with persuasive message strategies. The maturation in the 1920s is seen in the form of ads: 40 percent of all print ads were full-page; three-fourths of the ads focused on product benefits, but many focused on intangible appeals – a reflection of increasing affluence of the public; sex appeal was a common theme in a quarter of all magazine ads (Sloan, 2005). The growth of advertising can be seen in economic terms as well: ad revenue as a percent of gross domestic product went from 0.3 percent in 1865 to 3 percent in 1920, a level at which it has remained since (Stole,

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2006). Thus, as the 1920s dawned, the stage was set for a new consumer culture interdependent with advertising. First impressions

By the early 1920s, commercial values had permeated most aspects of society. The mass media, leisure activities, and even to some extent education all were becoming dependent upon, and influenced by, advertising.

*Growing fascination with public opinion*

The proliferation of advertising in the 1920s coincided with an increased academic and scientific interest in the concept of public opinion. There were 28 books on the subject published between 1917 and 1925 (Cutlip, 1994). It was in 1923 that Claude Hopkins wrote his landmark book *Scientific Advertising* to equate advertising with science:

The time has come when advertising has in some hands reached the status of a science. It is based on fixed principles and is reasonably exact (cited in Sloan, 2005, p. 408).

Of course, the social science with regard to the media and public opinion was in its nascent stage. Media scholars at the time were advocating the hypodermic needle or magic bullet theories, which assumed that people could be “uniformly controlled by their biologically based ‘instincts’ and that they react more or less uniformly to whatever ‘stimuli’ came along” (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995).

One of those stimuli that scholars recognized and began discussing thoughtfully was the “press agent”, also called “publicity man”, of the decade. Walter Lippmann connected public opinion to public relations in his writings. His analysis of the emerging profession in the 1920s was thoughtful and nuanced, expressing both benefits and consequences for society. His landmark book *Public Opinion* expresses both praise and fear for these early forms of public relations practitioners. He saw them as helpful by providing a clear picture and information and therefore saving reporters trouble. At the same time, Lippmann recognized that the publicity man would act as “censor and propagandist” and provide only what he wanted the public to see:

Were reporting the simple recovery of obvious fact, the press agent would be little more than a clerk. But since, in respect to most of the big topics of news, the facts are not simple, and not at all obvious, but subject to choice and opinion, it is natural that everyone should wish to make his or her own choice of facts for the newspapers to print. The publicity man does that (Lippman, 1922).

A few years later, Lippmann expressed doubt that the public is capable of resisting efforts to manipulate public opinion. In his 1927 book *The Phantom Public*, he asserted that the public is a myth and that public opinion is not a valid representation of their voice (Bybee, 1999). That same year, philosopher John Dewey responded with his own book, *The Public and Its Problems*, and argued more optimistically that the public could be more cohesive and engaged in public opinion with improved communication (Bybee, 1999). Also in 1927, Harold Lasswell wrote *Propaganda Technique in the World War*, which expressed a fear that propaganda would harm an unthinking public (Davis and Barton, 1981). Lasswell and others characterized propaganda in negative terms as sophisticated, organized attempts to deceive the public and exploit public opinion. For this reason it was unfortunate that Edward Bernays, whose name was already becoming synonymous with public relations, titled his second book *Propaganda* – only one year after Lasswell’s critique – and spoke neutrally of propaganda in a

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denotative sense as efforts to propagate or spread a message throughout society. Regardless of his intentions, Bernays associated public relations with propaganda and may have in turn influenced the media's negative perception of the profession (see below for more about Bernays' efforts to define the profession).

*Media in the 1920s*

One of the "problems" Dewey ascribed to the public was the distraction caused by proliferating media in the 1920s. Indeed, tabloids, movies, and radio were all relatively new media in the 1920s. The year 1919 had seen the introduction of Joseph Medill Patterson's *Daily News* in New York, which opened the door to other tabloids reaching large audiences. Movies went from silent to "talkies" and from 10 million to 100 million fans during the decade (Wilner, 2006). Radio entered the fray in 1920 when the first commercial station broadcast in Pittsburgh in 1920. By March of 1923 there were 556 radio stations and 600,000 radio sets owned throughout the nation (Emery and Emery, 1978). By the end of the decade, more than 10 million households had radios (Sloan, 2005, p. 350).

While magazines were not new, the 1920s saw the emergence of more of them as a primary vehicle for brand advertising (Ohmann, 1996). Magazine content also increasingly included coverage of public opinion, social issues, and leisure for busy people. New magazines in the decade included *Reader's Digest* in 1922, *Time*, in 1923, and the *New Yorker* in 1925 (Mott, 1968).

Newspapers, meanwhile, were questioning their role in this era of public opinion. In his 1923 book *Some Newspapers and Newspapermen*, Oswald Garrison Villard indicted the press by "claiming that newspapers too often had deserted their leadership role in molding public opinion and instead appealed to public tastes" (Start and Sloan, 2003). Such professional introspection had been evident for 20 years previously in the pages of the journalism profession's trade publication, *Editor and Publisher*, which raised concerns about press accuracy as well as propaganda (Rodgers, 2007). State press association codes of ethics in the 1920s specifically singled out the increase in the number of public relations practitioners as a concern (Cronin and McPherson, 1995). Perhaps because of this concern, two national journalism codes of ethics emerged in the 1920s. The American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1923 adopted the first nationwide code of ethics for the newspaper industry (Rodgers, 2007). In 1926, the Society of Professional Journalists adopted its own "Canons of Journalism" that, among other things, advocated remaining independent from "so-called news communications from private sources" (Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions at IIT, n.d.).

It was into this era of increasing consumerism, concern for public opinion, and journalistic introspection that "public relations" emerged as a concept and formal occupation. It would be met with the same skeptical eye viewing journalism and the state of democracy itself at the time.

*"Public relations" enters the public stage*

Public relations historian Scott Cutlip points out that "the use of communication to influence public opinion and human behavior is as old as civilization" (Cutlip, 1994, p. xiv). But, he notes, industrialization moved public relations from an activity to a full-time occupation. What makes the 1920s a germinal decade for public relations is its recognition as an occupation, the popularization of the term "public relations," and

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some significant events associated with pioneer practitioners. Among them was the effort to distinguish “public relations” from “press agency,” as the profession was more commonly known at the time.

Public relations began to be formalized as a vocation at the turn of the century. While the work was often called “publicity” and those doing the work “press agents”, the term “public relations” was seen already in the early 1900s. George Parker and Ivy Lee established a firm in 1904. Their famous “Declaration of Principles” – sent to newspaper editors to promise accurate information to the press and public – was created in 1906. The material Lee sent to editors was laid out in newspaper column galley sheets, which were labeled “public relations” across the top (Cutlip, 1994). A 1907 AT&T annual report was titled “public relations,” in which company president Theodore Vail used the term to describe building good will (Griese and Arthur, 2001). However, the term was used sparsely until the 1920s. John Hill, co-founder of the modern public relations firm Hill and Knowlton, noted that when he opened an office in Cleveland in 1927 he was “going into corporate publicity; the term ‘public relations’ was in scant use at the time” (Cutlip, 1994, p. 420).

Ivy Lee has been credited with regularly using the term “public relations” as a blanket description for his work beginning in 1916. In 1917 he began to make the distinction between public relations and publicity when he wrote an article in the *Electric Railway Journal*:

The advisor in public relations should be far more than a mere publicity agent (Hiebert, 1966).

But it took a while for that distinction to be practical. It was ten years later that he announced in a staff meeting at his firm that he would like to stop doing publicity and focus on policy for clients (Hiebert, 1966). In a 1928 letter to his largest client, John D. Rockefeller Jr, he elaborated:

Now the amount of publicity I send out is negligible. Most corporations have their own publicity departments. I rarely see their publicity. It isn't my business. My job is assisting in dealing with the public (Hiebert, 1966, p. 152).

Meanwhile, Edward Bernays was also trying to introduce the term “public relations” as a distinct term and practice. At the time he and his wife Doris Fleischman started their firm in 1919, he says in his memoirs that he had not heard of the term “public relations” yet, and called what he did “publicity direction.” He did not like the term press agent because clients would not “understand my intentions,” and the term publicity was a vague term (Cutlip, 1994, p. 168). A year later he was using the term “public relations” to describe his work. In 1923 he published his book *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, which was the first book about public relations. It was noteworthy for characterizing public relations as a management function, involving two-way communication. Perhaps most significantly, the publication of the book “introduced the term ‘public relations counsel’ into the American lexicon” (Cutlip, 1994, p. 176). In 1923 and 1924, Bernays taught a class on public relations at New York University. Bernays was a relentless promoter of the new profession. He took out an ad in the January 29, 1927, *Editor & Publisher* to define the term “counsel on public relations.” Near the beginning of the full-page, ten-paragraph apology he offers the succinct description of what a counsel on public relations does: “he interprets the client to the public and the public to his client” (see Cutlip, 1994, p. 181). In 1928, Bernays published

his second book, *Propaganda*. It was called an unfortunate move in that it associated public relations with propaganda, a term that had “ugly connotations” in post-war America (Cutlip, 1994).

The 1920s was an active decade in terms of cultural change, media concern with ethics and democracy, and the young public relations profession struggling to define itself publicly under a new name. It makes the media’s first impressions of “public relations” in the 1920s especially interesting.

### Method

For a study of media portrayals of the public relations profession in the 1920s, *The New York Times* and *Time Magazine* were sampled for articles containing the term “public relations” or “press agent.” *The New York Times* is appropriate since it was considered a paper of record for the country then as it is today. Also, its location in New York gave it proximity to the locations of some of the earliest public relations firms, which located in that city. *Time* was started in the decade, in 1923, as the first newsmagazine. It had a unique writing style that often blurred news and opinion as founders Britton Hadden and Henry Luce recognized that people were busy during the work-week and would appreciate a weekly publication that would “summarize and explain the news in a comprehensive, objective, and entertaining manner.” That effort to be both objective and entertaining provides us today with an interesting commentary on social issues of the times, including the emergence of public relations.

Since the focus of the study is on media portrayals of “public relations” in the decade of the 1920s, that was one search criteria when creating a sample of articles. “Press agent” was also used for comparison, since early practitioners were trying to distinguish public relations from press agency. The term “publicity” was ruled out because it was a broad term often confounded with other meanings not germane to this study. For example, there are 581 occurrences of the term in *Time* articles during the decade. Often, the term “press agent” is in the same articles. A previous study established that, by the dawn of the decade, “publicity” had gone from being a concept praised for making organizations more open to public scrutiny to being derided as a tool for manipulating public opinion (Stoker and Rawlins, 2005). Indeed, at the time, Ivy Lee considered “publicity” to refer to “the entire gamut of expression” (Hiebert, 1966, p. 11). Bernays considered the term “vague” when he started his firm in 1919 (Cutlip, 1994, p. 168).

To sample the articles, the electronic archives of both *The New York Times* and *Time* were used to search on the terms “public relations” and “press agent.” *The New York Times* allows for searches to be limited to headlines. This was done to narrow the sample[1] and to ensure that resulting articles were focused on the subject and that the term was not merely in the article as a person’s title or some other trivial use. *Time*’s archive does not allow searches limited to headlines. However, it is a weekly publication and the resulting article sample was a manageable number even when searching entire articles.

The resulting sampling yielded 189 articles for examination. In *The New York Times*, there were 108 articles with the term “press agent” in the headline, and 16 with the term “public relations” in the headline. In *Time*, there were 50 articles including the term “press agent,” and 15 including the term “public relations.” This already indicates the comparatively new nature of the term public relations. Indeed, in all of *The New York Times* publications prior to 1920, from 1857-1919, the term “public relations”

occurs only twice, and then it is in the context of describing individual relationships (e.g. “private and public relations”). The sample description can be seen in Table I.

The articles were examined using a qualitative content analysis. An essential feature of this method is the use of categories to organize, analyze and draw conclusions from the material. Specifically, the summarizing technique was used, in which material is paraphrased to skip irrelevant material and bundle the material that is similar and relevant to the study in order to reach general conclusions at a higher level of abstraction (see Flick, 2002).

For this study, the content of the articles in the sample were categorized along several lines. First, the contextual attributes of the information was noted: the type of organization mentioned that is conducting public relations (e.g. the motion picture industry, the railroads, a government official, a religious organization); the news or reason for the article (e.g. a personnel announcement of a public relations practitioner, covering an issue in which public relations is involved, an article substantially about public relations, an editorial, etc.). Secondly, more analytical categories were created to assess: whether “public relations” was defined in the articles by an organization or PR practitioner or the media; whether that characterization was positive or negative; whether PR was associated with “press agency” or “counseling”; whether the article was objective reporting or commentary/editorializing. Conclusions were drawn based on these categorizations.

**Results**

The articles were examined and categorized systematically according to the publication and the term being used, the same as in Table I. Results will be reported here accordingly, with general conclusions to follow.

*“Public relations” in The New York Times*

The majority of the articles – seven of the 16 – in this category focused on naming a person or a committee specifically charged with duties of “public relations.” These articles were substantive in nature, indicating that the use of the term “public relations” for a formal job title or committee was a novel concept. Significantly, officials from the organizations being covered – either the newly appointed public relations person, chair of the committee, or CEO – were allowed to explain the appointment and in so doing define “public relations.” *The New York Times* often carried direct quotes from these people and in all cases were objective in their reporting about the profession.

For example, an article about the Long Island Railroad forming a Committee on Public Relations explains that the management wanted to achieve understanding and

	<i>The New York Times</i>	<i>Time</i>	Total
“Press agent”	108	50	158
“Public relations”	16	15	31
Total	124	65	189

**Note:** *Time* articles are from 1923-1929 since the magazine started in 1923. *The New York Times* articles are those in which the terms were in the headline or subheads

**Table I.**  
A sample of articles including the terms “public relations” or “press agent” in *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine during the 1920s

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cooperation among “three factors of the transportation business – the management, employees and the public” (*The New York Times*, 1922b). The railroad president, Ralph Peters, offers a quote that indicates the objective of two-way communication:

Let us open up as many channels as possible between the management and our patrons, with the end in view that our patrons will have a closer idea of our problems and we will have a closer idea of theirs (*The New York Times*, 1922b).

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Similarly, E.E. Loomis, President of Lehigh Valley Railroad and Chairman of the Public Relations Committee of the Eastern (Railroads) Presidents’ Conference, characterized a new public relations office for the organization as an effort to enable informed decision making by the public. He described the office as “a clearinghouse for railroad information which will enable the public to formulate more intelligently its opinions regarding the transportation situation” (*The New York Times*, 1922a).

Public relations was also mentioned on several occasions as a factor in issues the paper covered at the time. Here also, it was implied that public relations was a positive force in society. One article describes dismay that Will Hays, “chief of the moving picture industry,” reinstated an actor who had been tried and convicted of causing the death of a screen actress. A major thrust of the article is that Hays should not have ignored his “Advisory Committee on Public Relations,” which included members of the clergy and other education and civic leaders (*The New York Times*, 1922c). It is ironic that the very same Mr Hays is appointed a few years later to head a new Public Relations Committee of National Air Transport, Inc. In the article covering the appointment of the new committee, Hays stresses that the efforts of the company “enlist the interests of the individual citizen.” In the same vein, the article, attributing Hays, explains the scope of public relations work to include drafting federal legislation to regulate and control air traffic, adopt an air policy, and extend airmail routes (*The New York Times*, 1925). This is a clear portrayal of public relations as being in the public interest and concerned with policy more than mere publicity.

During the decade, *The Times* carried at least one article that was devoted entirely to explaining public relations. It was coverage of a speech given at the American Management Association by W.S. Vivian, Director of Public Relations of the Middle West Utilities Company. Most interesting in this article is its objective portrayal of the fact that business leaders at the time did not agree on what “public relations” was. Vivian described public relations as an activity in mutual relationship building: “to get the public to see their relation to our business, of getting them to see their financial interests in our business and the economic importance of our business.” However, the article reports that G.A. O’Reilly, Vice President of the American Exchange-Irving Trust Company, saw Vivian’s definition of public relations as “too all-inclusive and general.” O’Reilly insisted on a one-way, limited view of public relations as an “interpreter” of the company to the public and a “disseminator” of company policy (*The New York Times*, 1927).

In only one article from this sample does *The New York Times* offer an editorial voice about public relations. However, it confounds the term with advertising. The subheading in the “By-Products” column reads “Thoughts on Public Relations,” but those thoughts are entirely about advertising (*The New York Times*, 1929).

Most of the articles early in the decade about public relations involve railroads and public utilities. However, two were about private corporations, such as AT&T’s

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appointment of Arthur Page as the first Vice President of Public Relations and another concerning the National Air Transport Company. In addition, one article subject is a university, and two are about religious organizations – the Jewish Federation and the New York Federation of Churches. Thus, public relations was seen emerging as a vocation in a variety of settings. In all cases, *The New York Times* was objective in its reporting, and the public relations practitioners or organization officials were the ones defining public relations in the articles. For the most part, they did so in accordance with the ways academics and practitioners today seek to define the profession – in the public interest, honest, providing two-way communication and contributing to informed decision making.

*“Public Relations” in Time magazine*

Articles in *Time* are often about the same types of organizations and in some cases are about the same story. But, in comparison to *The New York Times*, *Time* magazine articles including the term “public relations” contain noticeably more commentary, and more negativity toward the term. In many of the articles, the magazine puts the term “public relations” in quotes, indicating either a reflection of the new nature of the term or the editors’ snide attitude towards it.

In one editorial, *Time* editors react to the attempt by Edward Bernays to define “public relations counsel” in *Editor & Publisher* (see Cutlip, 1994, p. 181). *Time* editors negate Bernays efforts in their editorial by equating “public relations counsel” as the latest evolution of the “press agent” and “publicity agent.” They do so in the harshest of tones, indicating an early animosity between journalists and public relations:

As the mongoose loathes the cobra, as the herring fears the shark, as the flapper dodges ‘lectures,’ so do editors shun the machinations of a species whose villainy is (to editors) as plain as the nose on your face and as hard to clap your eyes on. This species was for a long time called ‘press agent’ (*Time*, 1926a).

*Time* took a swipe at another early public relations pioneer, Ivy Ledbetter Lee, when they indicated that newspapermen do not like or trust Lee. They did so in reporting an incident in which Lee gave information simultaneously to many reporters rather than grant an exclusive to a reporter from *American Mercury* (*Time*, 1926b). Lee defended himself in a letter to the editor in which he declared: “I do not believe that you will find any newspaper men who question the accuracy of any statement I make to them.” *Time* apologized for the phrase “do not trust,” but still pointed out: “it is part of the business of Ivy L. Lee, famed and unique adviser on public relations to many great corporations, to tell newspapermen what he wants them to know and when he wants them to know it” (*Time*, 1926c).

This journalistic animosity toward public relations is also seen in an article near the end of the decade in which *Time* reports that Columbia University tried to “conceal a course on press agency.” The course was called “Organization of Public Opinion.” Summarizing an editorial in *Editor & Publisher*, *Time* decries the teaching of “propaganda” and points out that *Editor & Publisher* “viewed with alarm the growing profession of ‘public relations counsel’ and had warned “this is the business that Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays . . . are in.” Thus, the implication is that Lee and Bernays were associated with public relations, but that public relations is associated negatively with press agency, and worse, propaganda. The disdain for the profession among journalists is evident at the end of *Time*’s article, in which they note that journalists

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“derided the fact that of Columbia’s 26 graduate journalists last year, six at once became press agents” (*Time*, 1929).

Public relations is also implicated as nothing more than propaganda in *Time*’s coverage of a Federal Trade Commission investigation of public utilities’ communication practices. The article makes clear the “public relations” executives had testified, and that they revealed “propaganda” activities such as rewriting textbooks and influencing teachers to stress that private operation of utilities is good, threatening to pull ads from newspapers that challenge their view, and maintaining “lobbies” (*Time*, 1928).

Thus, while *The New York Times* was offering objective coverage of the emergence of public relations and allowing practitioners to define it, *Time* would have none of it. The magazine’s professed purpose of summarizing the news and making it entertaining gave its editors more license to cast public relations in a critical light.

*“Press agent” in The New York Times and Time magazine*

Articles in both publications using the term “press agent” were numerous and similar, so they are summarized together here. There are both positive and negative associations of the term in both publications.

Several articles report that press agents were sought by government officials, from governors to President Harding. The governor of Connecticut hired a former editor as his press agent to “prevent misquoting of the governor” (*The New York Times*, 1924). President Harding was encouraged to hire a press agent because he didn’t know how to “sell himself” (*The New York Times*, 1923). *Time* points out that such a person – they call him a “Ballyhoo man” – might “degenerate into propaganda” (*Time*, 1923).

While press agents appointed for governing officials may or may not have legitimized press agency, press agents certainly made attempts to do so. A letter to the editor and a guest article by press agents try to clarify and honor the term. In the letter to the editor one practitioner claims that press agents “fake” news whereas a “real” publicity man provides truth (Scott, 1920). The author of the guest article tries to portray “modern” press agents as more sophisticated, clear and objective. However, this press agent calls the new term – counselor in public relations – a “euphemistic deception” (Sobel, 1927). Therefore, early practitioners share some of the blame with the media for confusing the initial characterizations of “public relations.”

Media coverage of press agents also presents a mixed view. Articles feature an attorney general’s criminal investigation of press agents for their deception by faking kidnappings for publicity. But they also include announcements that churches and other more noble institutions have press agents performing a worthy function. The most interesting articles are those that carry journalists’ overt opinions about press agents. One article complains that 1,200 press agents formed a national association, opining “they get lots of stuff in newspapers and pay nothing for it” (*The New York Times*, 1920a). A lengthy article commenting on the role of press agents and public opinion stresses “press-agenting was born in the circus” and equates the “press agent, director of public information and public relations advisor” as the same in their “making public opinion for the causes they represent” (*The New York Times*, 1920b). A review of Bernays’ book *Crystallizing Public Opinion* notes: “the public relations counsel, of course, is merely our old friend the press agent.” The article points out that there is a fine line between good and bad public relations practice. But the author further confounds the terms and presents negative connotations of the profession: “It is a dangerous occupation – that of public relations counsel or press agent or publicity representative – to leave unnoticed” (Mankiewicz, 1924).

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## Conclusions

Whatever the profession was called – “press agency” or “public relations” – it was not unnoticed by the media in the 1920s. It is evident in *The New York Times* and *Time* articles from the decade that even practitioners could not agree on definitions of the terms. There were a variety of practitioners effectively working to define the field – even beyond the “great men” of PR history such as Ivy Lee, Edward Bernays, and Arthur Page. In many cases, the person practicing “public relations” was a CEO or other official. Disagreements among these early practitioners reported by the media show public relations inconsistently defined as two-way communication and policy setting compared with one-way publicity seeking. So, those working in public relations are as much to blame as the media of the 1920s for causing confusion about the profession.

As for the media, their characterization of public relations was positive – particularly early in the decade – in *The New York Times*. *Time*, because of its writing style, is more critical. The most significant revelation from this study is that, for all the attempts by early practitioners to distinguish “public relations counsel” from “press agent,” the media at the time continued to combine the terms as synonymous. For this reason, media portrayals and public opinion today of public relations as merely media relations or, more negatively, as hype and deception, may be a legacy of the 1920s. The decade when “public relations” was emerging as a common term was also an era when media responsibility and public opinion were hot topics. Thus, public relations was inextricably tied to press agency and all its connotations. It is a history that may never be undone.

Relationships between PR practitioners and journalists today remain varied. In some cases the relationship is one of trust and respect; in others suspicion and scorn. This may be due to the fact that public relations professionals today vary in the way they practice and characterize their own work as honest dialogue and relationship building, mere publicity, or, in some cases, deceptive manipulation of public opinion. Perhaps such variance is the only constant across the decades. The media-cultivated impressions of the profession today are the results of the seeds planted in the 1920s, when practitioners, organizational leaders, and the media first began to argue about the proper definition, practice, and intent of an emerging occupation called public relations.

## Notes

1. There were 514 articles containing the term “public relations” and 16 with the term in a headline or subheading.

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**Appendix. A 1920s timeline: key events in the popularization of public relations**

- 1919 – Joseph Medill’s Daily News begins tabloid era.
- 1919 – Edward Bernays and Doris Fleischman open their agency.
- 1919 – Carlton and George Ketchum start Ketchum Publicity.
- 1920 – Ivy Lee and Associates forms (renamed from earlier firm).
- 1920 – First commercial radio station broadcasts from Pittsburgh.
- 1922 – Walter Lippmann writes “Public Opinion”.
- 1922 – American Association of Engineers holds “First National Conference on Public Information”.
- 1922 – *Readers Digest* begins publication.
- 1923 – Claude Hopkins writes *Scientific Advertising*
- 1923 – Edward Bernays writes *Crystallizing Public Opinion*.
- 1923 – *TIME* Magazine begins publication.
- 1923 – Oswald Garrison Villard writes *Some Newspapers and Newspapermen*.
- 1923 – American Society of Newspaper Editors adopts first nationwide Code of Ethics.
- 1924 – Advertising Federation of America Formed.
- 1924 – J.H. Long writes *Public Relations: A Handbook of Publicity*.
- 1925 – Ivy Lee writes *Publicity: Some of the Things It Is and Is Not*.
- 1925 – Richard Bell Niese writes *The Newspaper and Religious Publicity*.
- 1925 – National Better Business Bureau formed.
- 1926 – Roger William Riis and Charles W. Bonner write *Publicity*.
- 1926 – Society of Professional Journalists adopts first national Code of Ethics
- 1927 – Arthur Page begins work at AT&T as Vice President of Public Relations
- 1927 – John Hill opens office in Cleveland (forerunner of Hill & Knowlton).
- 1927 – Hayes Robins writes *Human Relations in Railroading*.
- 1927 – Edward Bernays takes out ad in *Editor and Publisher* to define “Counsel on Public Relations”.
- 1927 – Harold Lasswell writes *Propaganda Techniques of World War One*.
- 1927 – Walter Lippmann writes *The Phantom Public*.
- 1927 – John Dewey writes *The Public and Its Problems*.
- 1928 – Edward Bernays writes second book, *Propaganda*.

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