

LEADING ENCYCLOPEDIA DOWNGRADES PR
FROM AN ARTICLE TO A MERE REFERENCE

Public relations "represents a major change in the philosophy of business -- recognition of the ultimate authority of public opinion."

So said Encyclopedia Britannica in its 1968 revision, part of a 1½-pg treatise. In the new edition there is no article, only a 3-paragraph mention in the Reference Index. Tone has also changed. "Public relations has been subject to much criticism, both from social scientists, who criticize its techniques, and from the general public, which distrusts it," concludes the new edition.

Emphasizing this tone are references to related articles including "advertising design considerations," "propaganda goals & methods," and "public opinion manipulation." The following is what practitioners do, Britannica advises its large, impressionable audience: "issuing news releases; arranging press conferences; answering correspondence from the public; planning participation in community affairs; preparing films, pamphlets, employee magazines, reports to stockholders, and form letters; planning advertising programs; planning and publicizing exhibitions and tours; and undertaking research surveys to measure public opinion."

When Amelia Lobsenz headed PRSA's "PR for PR" cmte, one of its objectives was to work with publishers of reference books. Somebody better dust that one off. Despite pressure on dictionaries & encyclopedias caused by 1) the explosion of knowledge & 2) people's unwillingness to read long copy, it is difficult to justify downgrading public relations. Its centrality to modern life, expanding body of knowledge, widening role in organizations & potential for solving mankind's urgent problems deserves more, not less, explication.

ONCE (& FUTURE?) REFERENCE

"The public relations director or consultant frequently needs a high degree of persuasiveness in order to gain a hearing for a long-range point of view in councils concerned with immediate commercial objectives. In order to be an efficient representative of his company he must also be a representative of the interests of its employees, of the local communities in which it has factories, of the retailers who distribute its wares, of the consumers who buy them, and of the public at large. It is not necessary for him to be an altruist in order to do this; he need only realize that it is easier to eliminate sources of irritation than to justify them."

WHO'S WHO IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

DIED. Caroline Hood Carlin (NYC), 72, retired vp & consultant of Rockefeller Center; was 1st woman named to post of vp at the Center among other notable firsts; a leading pr prof'l in country & active in PRSA since its founding.

AWARDS. Robert Fegley (CEO coms, General Electric, Fairfield, Ct.) receives Univ. of Texas Outstanding Public Relations award; Ray Bonta (adjunct prof, UT) named Univ. of Texas Outstanding Alumnus in Public Relations.

FIRMS. Al Cotton leaves Norton Co. to form Al Cotton Communications (Worcester, Mass.); 617/753-1170...Agnew, Carter, McCarthy (Boston) acquires C.L. Strousse & Assocs (Boston).

PEOPLE. Toni Antonetti becomes ass't dir, media rels/Midwest, Burson-Marsteller (Chi)...Computer Aided Manufacturing-International (Arlington, Tex.) names Robert Waterbury coms mgr...Dana Corp. (Toledo, Ohio) appoints Don Decker dpr... Jack Powell Jr. becomes mpr, TRW (Cleveland).

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NAGC BATTLES IMAGE OF GOV'T PRACTITIONERS TARNISHED BY OMB ATTACK;
WASTE IS CHARGED -- BUT WITHOUT OBJECTIVE CRITERIA;
AFFAIR HAS POTENTIAL TO HARM PROFESSION AS A WHOLE

"Excessive gov't pr" is eliciting taxpayer feedback which "professional communicators especially" should be listening to, the head of Ofc of Mgmt & Budget's war on waste told Nat'l Ass'n of Gov't Communicators last month. Source of the criticism is mail, media articles and "my own meetings with individuals from around the country," said Edwin Harper. Result is moratorium on new films & publications per OMB Bulletin No. 81-16 (pr 5/4). Washington Star columnist Tom Dowling calls it government by crank mail. Here are 4 viewpoints from NAGC debate: (Audiotape of meeting \$3 from Linda Busetti, P.O.Box 7127, Alexandria, Va. 22307)

Edwin Harper, OMB

"The three issues are: 1) Who is competent to do the government public affairs/public relations job? 2) What should we be communicating? 3) Why are we communicating what we are communicating?"

"Running over budget was called to our attention so often that it seems to be a normal occurrence in government PIO shops. In the private sector there are severe penalties for running over one's budget: termination. I don't know of any cases where that has happened at the federal level.

"We -- all of us -- are responsible to keep the public and the Congress informed on the faithful execution of the law by the Executive Branch. Does this worthy responsibility include providing free information on "Dried Flower Arrangements" or "Organic Gardening, Think Mulch"?"

"Agency and program self-promotion is not new and will not be stopped completely, but we can give an honest, well-balanced presentation of the data that we must responsibly communicate to the public."

Richard Franzen, pres, NAGC

"We generally describe what we do as public information, or public affairs. Few are willing to concede, openly that is, that we are engaged in the practice of public relations."

"Nevertheless, many of the things we do to facilitate the process of two-way communication between government and the people are the same activities that are freely described as public relations by our colleagues in the private sector.

"I would like to borrow from the private sector to make an important point in the discussion of waste in government. As a member of NAGC, I endorse the concept of accountability. As a professional, I welcome the opportunity to have the work I do examined and evaluated on the basis of its real contribution and merits.

"We ask only that the criteria used to judge our performance be objectively developed, and fairly applied. The absence of specific definitions of performance criteria constitutes a major deficiency in Bulletin 81-16."



Tom Dowling, Columnist

"Harper had neglected to call Agriculture to find out anything about the publications he excoriated so merrily. He had merely isolated droll titles that caught his fancy and then moved against them with all considered research of some testy, uninformed White House pen pal out in Montana.

"Asked after the luncheon how he could improve on Agriculture's current policy of answering brown bag questions with a .07 cent leaflet, Harper said he might consider charging a quarter for the operation.

"Let's see: to start off with, a \$20 typed personal letter to see if the taxpayer is willing to pay a quarter for some information. Then, there's the bureaucracy required to handle the mail order correspondence and see that it's filed and in order. Then, you need to promote the new operations...."

ITEMS OF INTEREST TO PROFESSIONALS

"Who's Who in Consulting will list public relations & other consultants free, in 3rd ed. published by Gale Research Co. Includes professional consultants in U.S., Canada, other countries who are involved full or part-time in private practice, in consulting firms or as university faculty members. (For personal questionnaire, Consultants Projects, P.O. Box 428, College Park, MD 20740.)

"Claiming to be "one of only two companies in the U.S. engaged solely in public relations management consulting," Daniel H. Baer, Inc. (Sherman Oaks, Calif.) is celebrating its 10th anniversary. Firm's delineation of such services includes: "conducting attitude & communications audits; objective evaluation of existing programs or projects, structures & budgets; development of first time pr programs with built-in yardsticks for measurement; locating, screening & hiring public relations firms & personnel; structuring & evaluating pr research; and providing communications, management & marketing counsel on an as-needed basis." Baer serves other firms as well as direct clients. Release didn't say who the one competitor is.

"Releases are sought by newsletter providing information on new business opportunities & technological advances from world research centers. Monthly "New from U.S." will add to information presently featured by "New from Europe" and "New from Japan." Can market own new products or learn about others. (For info, Prestwick Pub'ns, 19 Airport Rd, Scotia, N.Y. 12302.)

Nelson Fitton, Dep't of Ag.

Fitton had with him the leaflet on safe brown bag lunches with which Harper had had such sport. It would turn out that 100,000 copies of the thing had been printed at a cost of \$721, or .07 cents apiece.

"What are we supposed to do when we get an inquiry from the public on this subject?" Fitton asked. "A .07 cents publication is cheaper than a letter. It's better than sending them a card saying 'sorry, we can't answer that question.'

"Then, there's 'Think Mulch.' We get three-quarters of a million enquiries a year on this subject. We send them the reprint (at a cost of 4 cents a copy.) What would our department have to pay if our scientists took the time to answer?"

Harper's questioning why the Agriculture Yearbook is given free to constituents of Congress led Fitton to respond that existing legislation requires the USDA to offer to Congress free copies.

MICHIGAN LAW PROTECTS WHISTLEBLOWERS, RAISES POTENT PUBLIC RELATIONS QUESTIONS: A PRR SYMPOSIUM

State's law provides "immunity for any employee, public or private (except state classified civil service), who reports a violation of law by his/her employer. An employee may not be fired, threatened, or discriminated against for making such a report." This raises several key questions for practitioners:

1. Whistleblowers -- effect on organization? Mutual trust & group consensus can be detrimentally affected by fear factor. "Family" feeling will go down the drain as employees and officers begin to wonder about their boss, secretary, peers, etc.
2. Once information is out thru media, gov't or public statement, how is practitioner to combat the allegation, whether true or not? You have only facts to counter emotionally-appealing accusations. Setting out facts often requires a long, logical recital -- dull stuff. And how do you prove something is untrue? Solution may be to actively solicit accusations inside the company or organization.

3. What method of internal handling should be used? Report of violation(s) is a judgement call. Practitioners may be able to guide employees by mediating, or developing guideline list, for measuring intensity of violation and acceptable course of action. (Stealing pencils is not the same as embezzlement or avoiding income tax.)
4. Practitioners become whistleblowers? That role is being debated by lawyers. Article in The Atlanta Lawyer (July/August '80) discusses proposed ABA Rule 1.13, which would permit "the disclosure of client confidences to third parties, including government authorities, if the client is a corporation (or other organization) affected by unlawful conduct of its officers or employees." Disclosure, the author says, would be a sharp deviation from the bar's traditional insistence on sanctity of confidential client information.
5. Professional response from lawyers -- like pr pros -- has been withdrawal from employment when wrongdoing is discovered. Question is whether lawyer is also expected to contact the authorities. PRSA's Code (Art. 5) leaves the decision to the member. Official interpretation "does not prohibit ... making such disclosures ... as he/she believes are legally required."

Michigan also enacted stringent lobbying registration reform (pr 5/11). Laws like these are bound to spread, believe experts -- including Westin.

Privacy expert Alan Westin, prof pub law & gov't at Columbia, suggests experimenting with new mechanisms:

- a) ombudsman
- b) inspector general system
- c) special regulatory-compliance review cmte

Pres of Nat'l Ass'n of Mfrs was recently quoted in Wall St. Journal in defense of whistleblowers. "The modern corporation must encourage the honest and concerned employee to blow the whistle on illegalities and actual malpractices...."

Statements are solicited for a pr symposium: What do you see as a practical course of action for dealing with whistleblowing? What organizational policies are needed, if any?