
An Introduction to
PUBLIC OPINION

BY

HARWOOD L. CHILDS

Professor of Politics Princeton University

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PREFACE

THIS volume is the outgrowth of a series of lectures constituting a part of a two weeks' course on public relations organized by the American Council on Public Relations and presented to groups of business men at Reed College, Portland, Oregon; Stanford University; and the University of Washington in Seattle, during the summer of 1939. They were also included in the short course offered by the Council in Milwaukee in February, 1940.

Public-relations problems are essentially public-opinion problems. Moreover, the academic student of public opinion soon discovers that those most realistically concerned with his field of study are men and women seeking to solve public-relations problems. Starting with the practical problems of public relations I have tried to show how a knowledge of public opinion will aid in their solution and what an understanding of public opinion involves.

The purpose of these lectures is twofold: (1) to present a theory of public opinion which will serve as a frame of reference for public officials, political leaders, business executives, labor leaders, and group leaders generally who are today at grips with public-relations problems; (2) to clarify the meaning of such terms as public relations, public opinion, public interest, and propaganda, and to appraise the role of certain institutions and practices in the public-opinion arena. Special attention is given to public-opinion polls, public-opinion research, current attempts to analyze propaganda, and the impact of foreign propaganda on the American scene. Some suggestions are offered for improving the functioning of public opinion in a democracy.

Limitations of the lecture platform precluded a detailed elaboration of the theses presented. Nevertheless, it may be of value to publish the papers substantially as they were delivered, even though the satisfaction that comes from meticulous refinement of statement is, to some extent, sacrificed. Definitions and philosophies are, by their very nature, personal matters. If Humpty Dumpty could make words

mean what he wanted them to mean, so can we; and so can we make our philosophies mean what we want them to. The important thing is as George Cornewall Lewis once stated: "Where all people talk on the same subject, they should be agreed about the vocabulary with which they discuss it: or, at any rate, they should be aware that they are *not* agreed."

I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Rex F. Harlow of Stanford University, President of the American Council on Public Relations, for the opportunity afforded me to test my thinking in the fire of comment, criticism, and suggestions that came from those enrolled in the Council's short courses. I wish also to acknowledge my indebtedness to the publishers of *Fortune* magazine, the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, F. S. Crofts and Company, William Morrow and Company, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, and the Macmillan Company for permission to quote various passages from their publications as indicated in the text. The publishers of the *Dictionary of American History*, Charles Scribner's Sons, have generously permitted me to make use of material I prepared for them in the lecture on *The Concept "Propaganda."* The National Council for the Social Studies and the *Atlantic Monthly* have been similarly gracious in permitting me to draw upon some material from previously published articles of mine in the lectures on *Public-Opinion Polls* and *Public Opinion and Social Control*.

HARWOOD L. CHILDS

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
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What Are Public Relations?

IN A recent article in the magazine *Fortune*, the author introduces a discussion of the subject, "The Public Is Not Damned," with this statement:

The year 1938 may go down in the annals of industry as the season in which the concept of public relations suddenly struck home to the hearts of a whole generation of businessmen, much as first love comes mistily and overpoweringly to the adolescent. Indeed, during 1938 there was scarcely a convention that did not feature an address on public relations, scarcely a trade magazine that did not devote some space to the subject, scarcely a board of directors that did not deliberate weightily on the powers of the new goddess. And they found that the sphere of this Mona Lisa was all of industry and that she presided over its most bewildering and least tangible aspects.¹

Current interest in the subject of public relations is matched only by widespread disagreement and confusion regarding its meaning. In order to discuss intelligently the backgrounds of public relations we must have a meeting of minds so far as the concept itself is concerned. And right at the outset I wish to stress a note of warning. If there are some who subsequently come to feel that my conception of this vitally important subject is too idealistic, I can only say that I am not primarily concerned with public relations as they are, but with public relations as they should be. Furthermore, I hold no brief for much that is labeled public-relations work—the antics, stunts, tricks, and devices by which individuals and corporations often seem to obtain good will without actually trying to remove the real causes of ill will. I am not particularly interested in any one thousand ways to win friends and influence people. For me the subject of public relations goes much deeper than many current treatises on professional and corporate etiquette would suggest. In my opinion the

¹ Superior numbers refer to numbered notes beginning on page 143.

prevailing interest in public relations will continue and increase, for it epitomizes one of the fundamental problems of our times.

Public relations may be defined as those aspects of our personal and corporate behavior which have a social rather than a purely private and personal significance. The increasing importance of public relations is due primarily to the increasing number of personal and corporate activities which do have this social and public significance. Personal freedom is rapidly assuming a new meaning in the face of widespread technological and cultural transformations. To define public relations is to define private relations, to draw a line between personal freedom and social responsibility. Such a line can never be static. It is a moving line that must be redrawn continually as conditions change. All that we can reasonably attempt to do is to draw the line as of today. We cannot see far into the future. In order to draw the line today, however, it will be useful to take stock of the immediate past to find out why this problem of public relations has become such an important, vital phase of our social, political, and economic life.

In defining public relations as "those aspects of our personal and corporate behavior which have a social rather than a purely private and personal significance" I am aware that I may be taking liberties with a concept that has different meanings for many students of the subject. The origin of the term is shrouded in mystery. It certainly was employed in somewhat its current connotation during the early years of the present century. I have in my possession an address delivered by an executive of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in 1906 on the subject "The Public Relations Problem of the Railroads." And it is worthy of note that public utilities were among the first, apparently, to give attention to the problem. Frequent references are made, for example, to the early efforts of the Bell Telephone System in the public-relations field.² And this is not surprising, because the Bell Telephone System, as well as railroads and other economic units "affected with the public interest," were among the first to feel the necessity of redefining economic freedom in terms of growing social responsibilities. The officials of the Bell Telephone System realized, even at a time when some prominent officials in steel and other manufacturing industries were pursuing a policy of "the public be damned," that the social effects of their business operations made it

impossible for them to define their own personal freedom in such language.

Before reviewing the important developments of the recent past that have given rise to current interest in the subject of public relations I shall comment on a few definitions of the term in order to underscore the nature of the problem as I see it. One writer has defined public relations as "the planned presentation of your point of view in terms that will create public understanding and win public acceptance."³ Of a similar character are these definitions: "By public relations is meant the art of tempering the mental attitude of humanity in general towards a company, so that its position with the public shall be impregnable,"⁴ or again "the development of cordial, equitable and, therefore, mutually profitable relations between a business, industry, or organization and the public it serves."⁵

Each of these definitions misses, I believe, an essential point. Public relations as such is not the presentation of a point of view, not the art of tempering mental attitudes, nor the development of cordial and profitable relations. It is not the label for a new technique of propaganda that will necessarily bring fame and fortune to those who use it. It is simply a name for activities which have a social significance. Our problem in each corporation or industry is to find out what these activities are, what social effects they have, and, if they are contrary to the public interest, to find ways and means for modifying them so that they will serve the public interest. The public-relations executive is not primarily a press agent or a propagandist. He is a student of the social effects of personal and corporate conduct who undertakes to use his knowledge so as to minimize the harmful consequences of such conduct and to maximize the beneficial effects.

Another author has defined public relations as "the name business gives to its recognition of itself as a political entity,"⁶ and still another as "a fundamental attitude of mind—a philosophy of management—which deliberately and with enlightened selfishness places the broad interest of the customer first in every decision affecting the operation of the business."⁷ These definitions display a broader and deeper philosophical insight. But public relations is more than a new philosophy of management, a new ism that will serve as an antidote to Communism or Fascism. Public relations simply refers to those

relations or activities of ours which have a general, social significance. It is the function of public-relations counsel to find out what these relations are, what social effects they have, whether these effects are contrary to the public interest, and what modifications in them may be necessary to bring them in line with the public interest.

I know that many will ask: What is the public interest? This is a crucial question, and I propose to deal with it at some length later. For the present I merely wish to stress the point that public relations is not a new technique of propaganda, nor is it some novel panacea or philosophy to be foisted on business. It is simply the name for certain types of activities, many of which were once of personal significance, but now, owing to the dynamics of social change, are affected with the public interest. An outstanding phenomenon of recent times has been the increasing scope of these public relations, the multiplication of social consequences from personal and corporate acts. These acts are the subject matter of public relations.

Some have defined public relations as simply the relations of a business or corporation with the public "judged by the common concept of sound human conduct."⁸ If, by this definition, we mean relations having a public or social significance I raise no objection. To insist, however, that the term be restricted solely to relations or activities generally regarded as sound is to prescribe ethical limitations which ignore the neutral, objective character of the expression.

Our conclusion, therefore, is this: Public relations is simply a name for those activities and relations of ours which are public, that have a social significance. The student of public relations wishes to know what they are, what social effects they have, whether these effects are in the public interest, and, if not, what can and should be done. Public relations is not the name for a new ideology, nor the designation for an esoteric art of propaganda. It is simply the name for a class of personal and group activities whose changing dimensions affect the lives of all of us.

The starting point in our thinking about public relations logically begins, therefore, with a consideration of the more important reasons why so many of our personal relations have suddenly been transformed into public relations. The farmer, for example, is often referred to as our staunchest individualist. For decades he was quite free to conduct his farming operations as he jolly well thought best.

He tilled the soil, planted seed, harvested crops, raised cattle, picked apples, cut lumber, mended fences, raised and educated his children about as he chose. Whatever he did or failed to do affected only slightly the welfare of his neighbors and even less the welfare of the community generally. His public relations were the least among his worries.

The situation of the farmer was not exceptional. The doctor and the lawyer, the teacher and the business man lived their lives in comparative isolation—at least, the number of persons affected by what they did was small. Out of this environment emerged a philosophy of public relations that was essentially a dogma of personal freedom. Slowly at first, then with accelerating tempo conditions changed. At first blush it seemed as though some evil spirit motivated the change. Men tried to identify the evil genius. They attributed the change to the grasping, selfish aims of individuals and groups; to the party in power; to labor; to radicals surreptitiously befouling the minds of the masses; to all sorts of personal devils.

One indication or measure of the increasing scope of public relations was legislation. Legislative bodies began to pass laws regulating the hours and conditions of work of women and children. Laws were passed regulating the practices of railroads and utilities. Pure-food laws were passed; milk had to be tested; fire escapes had to be built; doctors and lawyers had to be certified by the state before they could practice their profession; teachers had to undergo specified types of training before they could enter the classroom. The final straw, in the minds of many, was the adoption of the prohibition amendment, a measure which brought the drinking habits of the American people within the scope of public relations. How may we account for these transformations? Shall we attribute this broadening scope of definition to legislative maliciousness or the perfidious activities of would-be despoilers? Or must we look deeper to the very elements of social change themselves?

The fact of the matter is, as I see it, that impersonal, sociological forces were at work, having a centripetal tendency to draw individuals together into ever larger, ever closer, interdependent units. These forces were everywhere at work in society, but their effects were often minimized, especially in a country such as the United States, with an abundance of natural resources.

One of the most obvious of these sociological forces was population growth. From the national, historical point of view population growth brought about westward expansion, the opening up of new areas, the enlargement of the electorate, and expanding dimensions of publics and markets. With it went an increasing urbanization of the population. After the passing of the frontier, however, and the end of the nineteenth century the rate of population growth declined. Students of population tell us that this rate is likely to continue its downward tendency until we have a much more stable relation between population and natural resources. No student of public relations may ignore the implications of this great sociological force. It has affected and will continue to affect the social character of our activities. Personal and economic freedom in sparsely settled communities has a very different connotation from what it has in metropolitan areas or in a country with a high degree of population density.

I have mentioned some of the implications of population growth in quantitative terms. But the quality of the population, its composition, the interrelations of different nationalities within it, and the ever-changing character of its customs, mores, and attitudes exert a power influence upon the scope and nature of public relations.

Of equal importance as an explanation of the growth of public relations are political changes. Democratic government, in the sense of popularly elected officials, representative assemblies, and written constitutions, experienced a slow and uncertain expansion until the end of the eighteenth century. Even then the suffrage was narrowly restricted and mass opinion as a factor in government was largely ignored. The nineteenth century, however, witnessed a rapid and continuous development from these early beginnings. State after state adopted written constitutions. The suffrage was progressively extended. Not only did the proportion of the population officially participating in public affairs steadily increase, but formal responsibilities likewise expanded. The adoption of direct primary laws and the increase in number of elections, as well as the spread of the initiative and referendum, added to the civic responsibilities of citizens. The opinions of the masses became politically significant. Corporations and groups generally were compelled to recognize the political as well as the financial implications of what they were doing.

Another reason for the increasing significance of public relations is the spread of educational facilities with the accompanying increase in literacy. The public support of schools and colleges, the introduction of compulsory school-attendance requirements, and statutory rules affecting child labor made the three R's the general rather than the exceptional equipment of the population. It is estimated that more than two and three-fourths billions of dollars are spent annually for education in this country, and that one out of every two persons of secondary-school age, and one out of seven of college age, are in a secondary school or college. The full sweep of the changes accompanying this development is only partially suggested by the fact that nearly one-fourth of the population of the United States is directly or indirectly engaged in educational activities.

Democratic government not only assigns a large proportion of its citizens increasing responsibilities in the determination of public policies, but also seeks to make its citizens competent to deal with them. Whether the competence of public opinion is actually increasing, and even more important, whether the increase in competence, if there be such, keeps pace with increasing responsibilities, are questions of far-reaching importance. The significant thing so far as the student of public relations is concerned is that the spread of educational facilities raises the expectations and increases the demands of citizens. In many cases it aggravates discontent with existing conditions, multiplies efforts to remedy them, and makes public opinion a more volatile, articulate factor in state life. Masses of illiterates and uneducated persons may be contemptuously ignored in our pursuit of happiness and freedom. Not so the growing numbers of people turned out by our mammoth educational systems. The social and public consequences of our actions may remain the same; the size of the population and its composition may remain unaltered; even our form of government may remain unchanged. If, however, an increasing proportion of the population visualizes new ideals and expects higher standards of living, the social implications of our activities assume a new meaning. Discontent arises because of the gap between expectations and realities. It is not enough for American citizens to know that they have a higher standard of living than the Russians or the Orientals. They evaluate conditions in terms of their own ideals, not those of other peoples.

For many years the subway system of New York has operated shuttle trains between Times Square and the Grand Central Station. These trains operate today much as they operated when the system was built. At times the congestion at both terminals is indescribable. The foul air, the dust, the poorly constructed platforms, the clangor, noise, and jamming are almost unbelievable. Guards shout, as they have done for decades, "Watch your step," as you leap from platform to train. You hold your breath and squeeze into the train on the general theory that there is always room for one more. Only the pressure of steam or forced air could possibly close the doors.

No doubt when the shuttle was constructed people using this mode of transportation were more or less satisfied. At any rate, from the operating company's point of view passengers could take it or leave it. The subway was a purely private undertaking, and the company need assume no responsibility for social consequences or public attitudes. The management had no public-relations problem.

Today the situation has changed, owing in part to the growth in population; to an increase in the number of people using this supposed "convenience"; to the fact that people in New York have become more articulate politically, perhaps, but owing especially to the fact that people have come to expect more from transportation agencies than simply a piece of rolling stock that rolls between two terminals. They have been educated to demand more. The situation has become a public-relations problem. This is only one instance which illustrates the interaction of forces bringing about a changing concept of personal freedom and public relations.

The development and improvement of agencies of mass impression may also be cited as a reason for the increasing significance of public relations. Although journalism in a crude state came to this country with the early colonists, it was not until after the close of the Revolution that a daily paper was published in this country. For many years thereafter circulation figures were extremely modest. In spite of improved methods of news-gathering, typesetting, printing, financing, and distribution, it was not until the last few decades of the nineteenth century that newspapers with a daily circulation of over a million copies were possible.

The advent of motion pictures and radio broadcasting is largely the story of the last twenty years. Radio communication prior to the

World War was used chiefly for maritime and experimental purposes. The first real broadcast in this country did not occur until 1920. However, after the creation of the Radio Corporation of America in 1919 and subsequent improvements in sending and receiving apparatus, the growth of radio was phenomenal. Today nearly three-fourths of the families in the United States own radio sets, and it is estimated that broadcasting stations have a daily audience of more than thirty-seven millions. The tempo of technological changes in this field may even be accelerated now that television and facsimile transmission have become realities.

And so with the motion picture, which really started its dramatic career during the last years of the nineteenth century. It was not until after the World War, however, that its possibilities as an agency of mass impression began to be realized. In fact these possibilities were definitely restricted until after the invention of sound-recording devices and the installation of talking pictures in theatres throughout the country, beginning in 1928.

Technical improvements in means of communication have produced marked effects upon the scope of public relations. They have greatly enlarged the size of publics. They have increased the power and influence of those in a position to control and use these instruments and, at the same time, have weakened the relative influence of those who do not have access to them. We have to do not only with larger, better-informed, and more responsible publics. We also deal with publics whose opinions probably are changing at a rate more rapid than ever before. A mechanized world which enables individuals to establish contact with millions of people simultaneously is a world in which opinion changes over wide areas are certain to occur more frequently and suddenly. Nationwide hook-ups, feature pictures displayed at the same time throughout the country and over the world, newspapers and magazines with circulations in the millions can produce opinion revolutions as different from the slow evolutionary changes of the past as TNT is different from gunpowder.

New doctrines and ideologies which in the past could not be brought to the attention of the masses except by a slow process of infiltration can now be broadcast one minute with the expectation that they will take effect the next. A speech by the President, by an

industrial or political leader, which formerly would have taken weeks and months to bring to the attention of the bulk of the American people, may now be heard simultaneously by millions and affect the result of an election or the course of international relations the next day.

One consequence of this is that individuals are subjected to many more stimuli than formerly, are brought into closer touch with everybody's problems. To their own problems of family and occupational life are added the worries and problems of central Europe, the Orient, Africa, and South America.

But this is not all. Almost over night each of us may find himself living in a glass house. The doors of our skeleton closets are thrown wide open. Inquiring reporters and congressional investigating committees stand ready to headline any or all of our activities for the entertainment of curious masses. The press, the radio, and the motion picture have upset traditional notions of privacy and exposed us to the gaze of the multitude. Probably nothing has so profoundly affected our traditional freedoms as these developments in the field of communications. In face-to-face communities and groups our friends generally knew us for what we really were and could evaluate our motives and activities in the light of this knowledge. Not so the masses who are incessantly peering at us through the magnified, but sometimes distorted, lenses of journalists, broadcasters, and motion-picture producers.

The concept of public relations in our times has been affected, therefore, by sociological, political, cultural, and technological changes of a fundamental nature. Our personal freedoms have been increasingly circumscribed. Our social responsibilities have expanded and probably will expand, to what limits no one knows. No better evidence of this can be found than in the economic sphere, where economic forces have step by step vested our personal freedoms with greater and greater social responsibilities. Indications of this are numerous: the increasing size of undertakings, the concentration and integration of business units, specialization and division of labor, multiplication and refinement of products, standardization, trade unionism, mass production, and widening of markets. The activities of manufacturers affect directly the welfare of farmers, workers, and the consuming public. The activities of farmers in turn have a direct

bearing upon both the purchasers and the users of their products. The production and manufacture of intricate and refined goods necessitate the cooperation of an ever-increasing number of economic units. We usually cite the example of assembly lines in our large automobile industries. There we can see vividly how the actions of one affect the work of many. The failure of one person to do his job properly may throw the whole undertaking out of order.

In a very real sense, however, our whole economic system is an assembly line, and the welfare of the national economy is dependent upon the proper functioning of each unit. If it is difficult to keep an automobile assembly line functioning efficiently from the ore mines at one end to the garages at the other, how much more difficult must it be to order the functioning of an entire national economy? The introduction of this assembly-line principle into our national economy is the inevitable price we pay for the many kinds of goods and services we have. To run trains on time, to have radios in our homes, to purchase automobiles at the prevailing price, to have submarines, and to use typewriters, natural resources from all parts of the country and the world have to be processed and assembled, manufactured and distributed. To lament the increasing centralization of control within industry, to decry the advent of bigness and monopoly, is to plead for cruder commodities and less refined services. We do not wish to lower our standards of goods and services, and yet we insist upon a type of national economy in which they cannot be provided. Business through its inventive capacity has awakened in the minds of the masses wants that never existed and has provided the means for satisfying them. What it has failed to do is to take account of the social responsibilities it assumed by so doing.

Any satisfactory explanation of the growing significance of public relations may not ignore the many events of the post-war period that have disposed the masses to criticize the traditional functioning of our economy. Economic crises, periods of depression, unemployment, threats of dictatorial aggrandizement, price changes, demands for greater security, profits, taxes—all these have served to multiply tensions, create feelings of discontent and insecurity, and produce a more vigorous struggle for control over that instrument of salvation, public opinion. In order to realize many of their hopes and expectations discontented groups have turned to the government for aid.